

THE AFFAIR OF THE SMUGGLED MILLIONS

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DANGER UNDERGROUND

ONE of the most unusual crimes in the world must be that of wilfully causing loss of life in a coal mine. Perhaps the reason is that the pit criminal would almost certainly "go west" along with his victims in the sudden flare-up or explosion caused by any attempt to use firearms or explosives down in the black depths of coal, or in the mad rush of water resulting from the sudden breaking-in of the sea following damage to a gallery or shaft.

It is a red-letter day in the annals of British crime, at least, when anyone is charged in court (as happened not many years ago) of wrecking a colliery. In this recent instance, the miner who was charged is alleged to have been told off severely by an overseer for sending up his coal with an excessive quantity of dust, the rebuke bringing from the miner's lips a threat that the official should not work in that pit again.

When the morning shift came on they found the airway blocked, and about three hundred timber supports had been knocked out. Very luckily indeed there had been no night-shift at work there, or the consequences might have been very serious indeed.

The blocking of the airway resulted in the colliery being put out of action on account of "black damp." So serious is the presence of firedamp or gas in a coal mine that no miner is ever allowed to go down to his work until special officials, known as firemen, have been through all the workings on the look out for the faintest trace of firedamp or gas. And before the men enter the descending cage at the pit-head they are searched, in order that there shall be no breach of the strict regulations which forbid the taking down of matches or pipes or cigarettes.

But even when all possible precautions are taken, the least expected thing may cause a big tragedy—such, for example, as the spark from a miner's pick, which resulted in one of the worst mining accidents in twenty years, in Belgium. This was a really up-to-date pit, yet that accidental spark let loose an explosion that caused the death of twenty-six miners. Imagine the

ghastly horror of it—an explosion in a gallery 1,000 feet or more from the shaft!

The heroism showed by the rescue parties, which are always hard at their errands of salvation within a minute or two of the underground catastrophe, is not to be equalled anywhere else on the earth, in the sky, or under the water. Equipped with the latest scientific life-saving appliances, the men of the rescue party take their lives in their hands, and not infrequently go to their deaths as surely as those others whom they set out so stoically to rescue.

Even with a pit that never has shown a trace of the dreaded gas, fire may occur—from the spontaneous heating and then flare-up of the waste material generally used to pack into a seam after the coal is all worked out. You can picture the race to the safety of the main shaft when that ominous word "Fire!" echoes out through the workings, with men helplessly cut off by roaring flames or choking volumes of thick, swirling smoke.

There are other kinds of pit, in other parts of the world, where crime is embarked on more easily than in our mines. A perfectly true account illustrating this came to light when a notorious Rumanian brigand was recaptured after escaping from a salt mine, to which he had been sent as punishment for years of robberies.

In that salt mine, worked entirely by political and criminal prisoners, this brigand became an out-and-out despot. There were 600 working with him in this mine, surrounded by high, guarded walls. Every morning the 600 prisoners were sent down to get their quota of salt. The brigand had no liking for work, though he was possessed of the strength of a Hercules.

He conceived the plan of forcing others to contribute to the 1,000 pounds of salt that he, like all the rest, was expected to produce each day. And so he had leisure to exercise his skill in carving natty little chessmen, which each visitor to the mines eagerly bought from him. With the proceeds of his carving he accumulated sufficient funds to bribe a sentry, to explode a bomb at the entrance gate to the mine enclosure, and made his escape.

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By MAURICE B. DIX.

CHAPTER 1.

The Count Arrives.

MR. SEXTON BLAKE was busy with some delicate laboratory work when Mrs. Bardell came to the door on that bleak November morning which was to mark the inception of the long and difficult inquiry which in due course was to be recorded in his diary as the "Affair of the Smuggled Millions." If he had known at the time that the sinister business would bring him into exasperating conflict with that devil-may-care freebooter, Punch Bennett, he might have declined the case and brought his great talents to bear exclusively on the work of national importance which was then occupying him.

On the other hand, enjoying as he always did, a bout with the cheerful Punch, the knowledge that Punch was concerned, in a dubious role, might have added zest to the chase and brought him wholeheartedly into the affair. As it was he looked up from his test tubes and politely asked the name of the visitor who had so peremptorily rung his door bell.

"It's a man," Mrs. Bardell said, in a tone of voice which indicated that "male" might have been a better word. She sniffed. "A foreigner."

Sexton Blake looked somewhat distractedly at the bubbling liquid in his

test tube and appeared undecided. That it was a case went without question. The sharp and urgent ring had settled that point. "What do you think?" he asked Tinker.

Tinker's reply was indirect but decisive.

"I hate chemistry, guv'nor."

"Then we'll have him up by all means," said Blake. "Send the man along, Mrs. Bardell, please."

"I don't hold with foreigners," Mrs. Bardell said formidably and went back to the front door. Blake heard her open it again and chuckled. The good woman had left the foreigner standing on the doorstep.

The man she now admitted was of the servant class: black suit, an over-laundered expanse of white collar and starched shirt-front, and an oiled and obsequious manner which accorded with his general appearance of servility. Like many fellows of his type his toadyism was evidently reserved for his master and gave way to an aggressive rudeness in his dealings with other people. Evidently a mere detective came somewhere between a constable and a plain-clothes policeman in his assessment of the social scale; certainly quite inferior to his own important calling.

He looked round the laboratory with

a lordly and disdainful air, omitting to remove his bowler hat.

"Which one of you is Sexton Blake, the detective?" He was obviously French, but his English was good.

Tinker pricked up his ears and looked at the man as if he were something nasty the cat had brought into the room.

Blake, however, immediately put the fellow in his place.

"What do you want, my man? I'm busy!"

The servant's mental processes in the face of that sharp reproof were patent to see even by a man far less gifted than the great Baker Street detective. The man gave one quick glance at that stern and hawklike face, the great dome of Blake's forehead, and the piercing, intelligent eyes, and came down to earth on greased skids. His bowler hat was hurriedly plucked away and his manner was at once on the lines of are-the-eggs-to-your-liking-sir? idea.

"I am the factotum of Monsieur le Comte Raoul de Merency de Brille of Chateau Brille, in the Department of Meurthe-et-Moselle, in our poor France."

"And ain't that something!" chuckled Tinker all to himself.

Sexton Blake was amused. He enjoyed that designation, "factotum." The fellow had come tumbling down to earth but he had done his best to salvage some portion of his vanished dignity.

"Yes?"

"My master, Count Brille, has a commission for you."

"Who are you?"

"I am—er—as I have said."

"Your name, man!"

"I—my name?—I am Jules—er—just Jules."

"Jules what?" Blake was abrupt, purposely so, he did not like the fellow.

"Jules—Cambert."

Tinker thought of camembert cheese.

That was it, the fellow looked like a piece of cheese.

As for Blake, he had marked that brief hesitation. For some unknown reason the man had given a false name. Quickly he ran that down to earth. He would not dare to give a false name unless he was serving this yet to be produced count under the same false name.

"Sit down! There!" The detective pointed to a wooden chair near his table of retorts and test-tubes.

"I am quite all right, sir!"

"Sit down, my man!"

Tinker, quick on the trigger, moved unobtrusively to the other side of the room. As Jules sat gingerly on the edge of the chair, ill at ease, the young man pressed a button which made no sound. Jules had been photographed for future reference.

"Let me have the details of this commission," Blake requested thoughtfully. "I am exceedingly busy, but —" He spread his hands expressively. In the ordinary course he would have bundled the fellow out then and there for having the impudence to come to his house sailing under false colours. At the moment, though, for that very reason his interest had been quickened. It was not the first time that a man had come to that house thinking in his conceit that he could outwit Blake and get the use of that giant mind to aid in a criminal enterprise put forward under the cloak of honesty. Also, thought Blake, it would not be the first time that men of his kidney had been hopelessly outwitted.

"But it is my master, the count, who wishes to see you, sir."

"Where is he?"

"He is in the taxicab at the door, sir."

Blake almost laughed. Who was this French count who went through all the formality of sending a courier ahead of him for no other purpose than to

emphasise an importance which his own presence might fail to materialise?

"Well, my good fellow, ask him to come up."

The man rose with alacrity.

"Then you will——"

"Send him up," Blake said, non-committally.

"At once, sir," and Jules vanished through the doorway.

Blake turned back to his test tubes.

"Well, Tinker?"

"A phoney, if ever there was one, guv'nor."

"In what way?"

"That isn't his name."

Blake smiled. Tinker rarely missed the reasonably obvious.

"You caught on to that? What else?"

"Well—er—nothing else, guv'nor," Tinker stumbled, knowing that there was another point and the guv'nor was testing him.

Sexton Blake placed a delicate pyrometer in some molten metal, noted the temperature, and made a recording.

"Exact," he said, "that concludes the experiment." With an air of satisfaction he turned off the switches on his ovens and put out the bunsen burners. But he had not left his question in the air. "Old son, you see the obvious at once, you are reasonably quick to penetrate the fairly obscure, but you cannot always clear your mind to assess the intricate. For example, when the man said his name was Cambert I rather think your mind leaped to camembert cheese because the chap has the oiled and smooth look of a piece of cheese.

"Good heavens, so I did, guv'nor!"

"And in hugging the joke to yourself you quite failed to note the eagerness in the man's voice when he asked me if I would undertake the commission, whatever it is."

Tinker was crestfallen.

"So I did. I remember now."

"And that might be regarded as remarkable. They are anxious that I,

Sexton Blake, undertake some inquiry for them. It poses several questions. Here we have a man, obviously sailing under false colours, anxious to enlist my services. Am I to be used as window dressing to give the appearance of honest inquiry? Also, is the master the servant and the servant the master?"

"I don't quite get it, guv'nor."

"Oh, come, Tinker," said Blake, "if this man who gives us a false name is the honest courier or servant he professes to be, why should he have an eager interest in my decision? It would be more in keeping if he had done no more than arrange an interview for his master." There was a noise on the stairs and heavy breathing. "An invalid, an extremely corpulent man, or a cripple," announced Blake. He listened intently. "A cripple," he decided. "We shall now see another section of our mystery."

The man who came into the room was a cripple leaning heavily on Jules' arm with one hand, the other grasping a rubber-feruled stick which he made painfully secure on the polished floor before advancing himself. Tinker almost made the mistake of moving the chair which stood before the concealed camera, so overcome was he by the man's hideous deformity; but he caught a warning glance from his master. He rushed to the count's assistance and helped Jules lower the man to the hard wooden chair.

"You may go, Jules!" The words, in French, had the curious insolence of a man playing a part, not at all in keeping with the habit of a gentleman addressing his servant.

"You are sure, Monsieur le Comte?"

"Go man, you tire me!"

Jules vanished like a startled cat, but Sexton Blake caught that fleeting smile of derision which slipped along the fellow's thin lips.

Tinker was looking hard at this strange visitor, taking in all his physical markings which he knew his

master had photographed on his mind in one swift appraising scrutiny. The count's left leg was ironed, a twisted, emaciated limb which ended in a foot of almost hideous deformity enclosed in a special boot which had been polished to an almost wax-like glaze. His right leg, as if in ribald mockery, was as well formed as Tinker's own. The man was short, but of such girth across the chest as to suggest another deformity, but there was no hump to his back. Tinker thought of a gorilla and wondered if he would see a hairy monster if the immaculate linen could be removed from the man's torso.

All this grotesque malformation was surmounted by a well-formed head of such startling beauty that even Sexton Blake toyed with the thought that some Homeric struggle had gone forward at the man's birth between a good fairy and the imps of the lower regions. The finely chiselled features were marred only by an ungracious twist to his lips and the air of suspicion and lurking cruelty in his blue eyes.

The man spoke in a beautiful tenor voice which, as they had already heard, could rasp in the lower cadences with a snarling irritation. Sexton Blake wondered if he would have to revise his first question as to which would turn out to be the master, and which the man. He noted that Tinker had taken the precaution of exposing a film in the hidden camera.

"You are Sexton Blake, the detective?"

Blake bowed slightly, and there was reproof in his quiet dignity.

Immediately, as if the strange difference between the man's body and his perfect head had been carried through to his brain, the Count accepted that reproof and exhibited a charm as unexpected as it was attractive.

"Forgive me, Mr. Blake, the ills of my body sometimes betray me to churlishness."

Sexton Blake, not quite mollified by

the change of manner so quickly assumed, inquired the purpose of his visit.

"I want to set some rascals by the ear and recover a fortune."

"Perhaps we had better go to my consulting-room?"

"This will do, Mr. Blake, I don't move unless I have to. May I outline my troubles to you?"

Blake bowed.

"Tinker, take notes."

The commission which this curious man placed before Sexton Blake involved as strange a story of stark fear and national catastrophe as any man could ever have listened to since the dark and perilous days of the Revolution, when France had been torn asunder by events almost as disastrous as the onrush of the Nazi hordes in 1940. It was a story of duplicity and double-dealing in high places, an almost shocking decadence where there should have been strength, and the low and shocking business of *saute qui peut* before the avalanche descended upon them.

The recital, stated in such matter-of-fact terms, like a banker discussing a due bill, made Blake think that the man who was telling the terrible story was neither shocked nor alarmed by the crushing defeat his country had sustained or the high crimes and misdemeanors which had in part produced that calamity.

Count Brille, if his story could be believed, had lived in a chateau in the valley of the Moselle, not far from the town of Nancy. In this part of old Lorraine his family had lived for several centuries, their income being derived, in common with other great families in the neighbourhood, from the extensive iron and salt deposits for which the district is famous. Brille stated that his family was the richest, if not the most consequential, in the Department of Meurthe-et-Moselle, the premier social position being yielded to a family of the old aristocracy, the

head of which was a young and sprightly lady named Marquise Lang-tac. This latter person, Suzanne Lang-tac—and Blake noted the lush gratification with which the count mentioned the name—had apparently engaged herself to a certain Jean Bartot to the professed horror of the narrator.

"Jean Bartot was one of the Paris gang," said Count Brille with a curl of his lips.

"I have heard of Bartot," Blake advised, plucking confidently at his capacious memory, which informed him that Bartot was a hanger-on of the French Ministries, a man with all the instincts of a Laval added to the predatory habits of a hyena.

"There you have the background then," said the crippled count. He eased his game leg into a more comfortable position, but declined Tinker's suggestion that he would be more comfortable in an easy chair in the consulting-room. "I am never comfortable," he said through twisted lips, and turned back to Sexton Blake. "In the spring of 1940 we got information that the Germans would march."

Blake, who was meticulous in the matter of getting his facts correct, interrupted. "The season is too loose, count. What month?"

"Er—March; no, it would be February, late February."

"That would be well before the Germans marched into France then?"

"Yes, about three months."

"Incredible," mused Blake. "Are you suggesting to me, Count Brille, that the German plans were known to you several months before they marched?"

"I am stating facts," snapped Brille somewhat cavalierly, and then added hastily as he noticed the curl of distaste on Blake's lips: "at least, Bartot knew."

Sexton Blake could not help a sarcastic rejoinder.

"And you, despite your dislike of this

alliance between the marquise and this political mountebank were willing to listen to his counsels?" The detective's perception had already leaped ahead of the sordid story and pictured a scramble which had evidently ended in disaster; hence the presence of this crippled count in his house.

"Devil take you, man!" snapped Brille. "Were we to lose everything to the Boche?"

"I am not a wealthy Frenchman," Blake said quietly, and Tinker chuckled to himself.

Count Brille took the rebuke on the bastions of his vast conceit.

"We held a meeting," he continued, "to discuss the—er—eventuality." His head went back like a Greek statue as his mind grappled with a sense of distaste which should have been present but apparently was not. "I came here for business, Mr. Blake, not to listen to a homily on the virtues of Englishmen."

"Pray continue," Blake said quietly. He was most detached.

"Bartot was there, and the gutter-snipe demanded his price for his information."

"What do you mean—the price and the information? You seem to be getting the cart before the horse, as we say in England. How could he demand a price when you did not know what he had to sell?"

Count Brille shifted uneasily for the first time since he had entered that room. Possibly the honest distaste of Sexton Blake had punctured even his colossal conceit.

"We had a pretty good idea of the way things were going," he said, as morosely as any schoolboy caught in the act of cheating at lessons. "In any event, this swine Bartot made it plain to us that we would all be paupers in a few months unless we listened to him, and he would not say a word unless we contracted to pay him fifty thousand English pounds."

"I'm reassured to learn that Bartot

had a firm faith in the English pound," Blake said dryly. "Did you agree?"

"Of course we agreed!"

"Was this infamous contract committed to paper?" asked Blake.

"Yes." Again Brille stirred himself uneasily. His need to use Blake in this affair must have been paramount, as the detective had decided; otherwise he would not have accepted the continued reproofs with such squirming placidity. He continued his recital. "Bartot was cagey enough, the document was no more than a demand bill on an English bank signed by all of us. We arranged for the money to be placed in that bank, drawing on our London balances for the purpose."

Sexton Blake asked for the names of the contracting parties. They were seven in all: Count Brille, Marquise Langtac, Henri de Chateaufort, Rene Malsuite, Count Bazon, Francois Schneider and Maurice Villais. Blake recognised some of the names. Bazon and Schneider, in addition to their mining interests, were fairly well-known provincial bankers. Maurice Villais had been a somewhat noisy deputy from his department who had been caught in some scandal which evaded the detective's mind at the moment. He did remember Chateaufort, however, as a mincing little dilettante who frequented London art sales from time to time. He also remembered that Inspector Ed. Miller of Scotland Yard had on one occasion told the man that his talent for outrageous parties might be more appreciated in Paris than in London. Miller had subsequently conducted the man to the boat train in a manner which left no illusions in Chateaufort's mind.

"Please continue, count."

Count Brille continued his story with the same indifference to the decencies which had marked him from the beginning. Bartot, once he had his price, informed this small group of rich people that there was no chance whatever of the French Army successfully resisting

the German drive when it came in the spring. The troops were ill-equipped for modern war, low in morale, and almost entirely lacking in the fighting spirit.

The rot had so far entered the army and the men in authority, with a few exceptions, that the only question troubling the minds of the men of Bartot's kidney was whether to take a chance in line with various specious promises made by the forerunners of the Nazi horde, or cut their sticks and get to England or America in the guise of refugees, first reducing their property to English pounds or American dollars. Brille and his associates took this latter course.

Owing to the demands being made on the French national purse it was neither politic nor possible to carry out the large transaction they had in mind without bringing an immediate embargo on the transfer of funds and other assets to England or the United States. They therefore had to proceed by stealth. They did acquire considerable sums of money in English pounds and American dollars, but the method pursued as least open to comment was to purchase diamonds and other precious stones on the markets at Paris, Lyons and Marseilles, and then send the packet to England by means which were speedily devised. A young French flyer who in the course of his duties made certain flights to England was bribed to carry Count Brille, his servant Jules, and the parcel of precious stones, valued at over £2,000,000, to England.

At this point Count Brille's narrative came to a halting conclusion.

"We landed in England, pretending a forced landing on Salisbury Plain. A motor-car was waiting for me, and we went to an hotel in Salisbury, taking the parcel of stones with us. The parcel was stolen that night."

"One minute!" cried Blake, seeing that they had now arrived at the crux

of the inquiry which Brille hoped to thrust upon him. "Let us be more concise. First, the name of the flyer?"

"Lieutenant Rene Ladoux."

"Good! Now, when you say 'we,' do you mean all three of you went to this hotel?"

"Yes, all three of us; but Ladoux, in line with his pretended crash, went to the English authorities to get the aeroplane taken care of. He rejoined us at the hotel at about nine o'clock."

"When was this?"

"On May second this year."

"By thunder, you've taken your time getting to me! It is now November!"

"But monsieur must understand this was not an affaire for the housetops!" exclaimed Brille, forgetting his perfect English for the moment. "We made the inquiry of the most secret."

"How about Ladoux? Did he return before the stones were stolen?"

"No; the stones were stolen about eight o'clock."

"How do you know?"

"I was foolish. I and Jules had two adjoining rooms—en suite—you understand?"

Blake nodded.

"The parcel was on my bed. The door was locked and I stepped into Jules' room—er—for the little moment. When I returned the parcel was gone."

"The windows?" Blake asked.

"Locked!"

Sexton Blake nodded. He was slowly but surely confirming his suspicion that Count Brille was not particularly interested in the catastrophe, that perhaps there had not been a catastrophe, and he was merely making a careful move in a shrewd game.

"Then this Lieutenant Ladoux could have stolen the parcel?"

"Also the six people who were concerned and"—Brille's mouth writhed—"Bartot."

"Precisely. And what do you want me to do?"

Brille's eyes opened in polite surprise.

"To find the jewels of course."

"And the fee?" Blake asked, and even Tinker was surprised at the abruptness of the demand.

"The fee, naturally."

"Shall we say one thousand pounds as a retainer, and ten thousand more when I have recovered the stones?"

"It is agreeable." In fact, it seemed to be more than agreeable. Count Brille, then and there, took out a cheque-book and wrote a cheque for one thousand pounds. He also regularised the whole matter by writing a short form of agreement for the entire commission. "Now, if you, young man, will help me to my feet and summon Jules?" he asked Tinker.

Tinker sprang forward, and Pedro, who had been watching the crippled count with malevolent eyes for some time, did the same thing.

"Hold that snarling brute!"

Tinker, looking at the man as the words frothed to his lips, was conscious for one of the first times in his life, of a sudden abject fear. The count was no more afraid of Pedro than Sexton Blake himself, but his eyes were aglow with a bestial light as if he were anxious for the animal to spring so that he could tear his throat out with those abnormally strong fingers which were rigid in talon-like curves.

Sexton Blake's calm voice was as hushing to this suddenly kindled bestiality as a soft wind flattening a troubled sea.

"The dog is all right, count, but you must give me some of your time."

"Yes—yes, of course. But I've told you everything."

Blake disagreed.

"But I must know the whereabouts of the parties to this contract, and Bartot."

"Bartot!" Again the name swirled on the count's tongue like a maniac's froth. "You do well to ask about Bartot. He knew everything. He obtained the aviator. He is in London

at the King's Hotel in Regent Street. You would do well to ask questions of the reprehensible Bartot."

"I intend to," Blake answered dryly. "And this aviator, Rene Ladoux?"

"He is of the Fighting French, but he is of the ground crew, a mechanic, you say; but his whereabouts are a military secret."

"The Government gives me facilities," Blake advised quietly. "How about the others?"

"Madame la Marquise is at the Hotel Splendide. The others are in a house at Hampstead."

The count gave Sexton Blake the address.

"You seem to be well housed," remarked Blake.

"We all have London bank balances," Brille advised somewhat loftily, and Blake was reminded of his reference to London balances in connection with the shocking transaction with Bartot.

"Then that will be all for the time being, count," Blake advised, and sent Tinker to fetch Jules.

Again he had some difficulty in restraining Pedro when the crippled man made his exit from the room.

CHAPTER 2.

A Battle of Wits.

WHEN Tinker returned to the laboratory he found Sexton Blake had vacated the room and gone to his consulting-room, where he was already sitting behind a cloud of blue smoke from his curved briar. His face was lined with thought, and the distaste for his recent visitor remained. Pedro looked up at Tinker with the most benign expression on his face as if to say it was all in good fun, and please do not be annoyed because I used my doggy instinct to point out a wrong 'un. Tinker patted the faithful dog's big head.

"Pedro didn't like the cove, eh, guv'nor?"

"The animal world does not tolerate malformations of the body," was Blake's enigmatical remark. "We seem to have accepted a commission from a dubious man to look into a still more dubious business."

"I thought once or twice you were going to show him the door."

Sexton Blake did not comment on the suggestion. He sucked a cloud of smoke from his pipe and let it curl out from his firm lips.

"I do not like the case," he said slowly, "and I do not like the man. When I find a man in England who's twisted foot has so thwarted his ego that he has reverted to the instincts of the jungle, I have a certain duty as a detective to perform."

Tinker looked up sharply and said:

"Yes."

So his master had not missed the fiendish by-play when Pedro had snarled at the count. There was not much went on before those eyes without leaving a photographic impression on the most subtle mind in England.

Blake, as if he had examined himself and discovered he was eminently fitted for the grave task he had envisioned, relaxed and grew whimsical.

"It sounded like the commencement of a story by Dumas, but we shall see if we can bring it to a conclusion by Sexton Blake." He smiled across at Tinker. "I have never run across a really perfect liar except perhaps Doctor Crippen, but as he was hanged we must put him down as sadly short of perfection. As a basis for action I think we may assume that Count Brille told us the truth so arranged as to give him a clean bill of health. You heard it all, old son, where should we start?"

Tinker, who was nobody's fool in this detecting business, hit the first nail on the head.

"For a start, guv'nor, how about seeing Mr. Israel Lewis in Hatton Garden? A deal in diamonds like that

would make a stir even in the London market."

"Strike one, as the Americans say," agreed Blake. "And the next point in that fertile brain of yours?"

"This marquise, guv'nor!"

Sexton Blake was evidently in a good mood.

"Because she has the alluring name of Suzanne Langtac? I suppose that has an allure for a young man. Let me see, there was a Suzanne who was a tennis champion, wasn't there?"

"Suzanne Lenglen," grinned Tinker; "French, English and Olympic champion."

Sexton Blake nodded, well pleased.

"And so, because of the allure of a name, with a title added, you think we should visit Suzanne?"

Tinker, used to his guv'nor's teasing manner in certain moods, was not to be caught out.

"No, guv'nor, because she is the direct contact with this man Bartot. Brille says they are engaged to be married."

"And what do you think Suzanne can tell us that Brille has omitted to say?"

"I don't know," Tinker said frankly; "that's what I want to find out."

Blake smiled.

"We seem to be getting somewhere without using my brains at all. First of all, we are agreed that Brille is playing some deep game of his own, and we are agreed that little games like that are not permitted at Baker Street. Next we have a chat with Mr. Isaac Lewis to learn what we can about the diamond market as it concerns our inquiry. Then we call on the Marquise Suzanne Langtac to find out if her story agrees with that of this crippled count. Isn't there something else, Tinker?"

Tinker was quite capable of rising to the occasion.

"You think we should get hold of this airman, Lieutenant Rene Ladoux?"

Sexton Blake got to his feet.

"Come, come, Tinker, we have just

taken two photographs, and my friend Chadagne of the Sureté in Paris is one French refugee who can be of value to me. He has a photographic mind in regard to criminals."

"Hell's-bells, that's right, guv'nor!"

"The possession of an orderly mind is a good habit in detectives and—er—criminals, Tinker." The young man wondered if that final addition had reference to the man whose name was signed to the cheque lying on the table. "Then if you will attend to the photographs I think I shall go to Mr. Lewis's place of business by bus."

"Why not use the Grey Panther, guv'nor?"

"Because," said Blake, "I have no intention of abusing the Government's kindness in letting me have sufficient petrol to keep the Grey Panther on the road."

Patriotic bloke, the guv'nor, thought Tinker, and made his way to the laboratory to attend to the photographs.

Mr. Isaac Lewis's knowledge of diamonds and the diamond market was as encyclopædic as Sexton Blake's knowledge of crime and criminals. They were old friends, and had exchanged information of value on more than one occasion. On this particular day the detective's disclosure was rather more startling to the diamond merchant than was usually the case.

"Over a million pounds in diamonds, eh, Mr. Blake? That'd be a bad smack in the eye in our business if they are offered all at once."

"Probably nearer two millions, if I can believe my information."

"But how on earth did a package like that get to London?" A knowing look came into the wise old eyes of the merchant. "We have our ear pretty close to the ground, you know."

"Subterranean methods," Blake told him, and then gave the merchant chapter and verse for everything. He had made Isaac his confidant many

times, and that confidence had never been abused. What was more, he had always found that the best way to get the old man's confidence was to hold nothing back. In this instance he was well rewarded.

"So that's the answer," mused Isaac. "Excuse me a minute." The old man went to an immense safe in the corner of the room and took out one of those brass-bound books with a padlock which are still to be found here and there in old-established firms in commercial London. It was evidently a record of closely-guarded trade secrets. Isaac thumbed through the leaves and soon discovered a few notes in his microscopic handwriting which always amazed the detective.

"Here we are. Our agents advised me earlier in the year that individual buyers made a clean sweep of the Paris diamond market. Of course, the stones all came from London in the first place." He closed the book. "Curious business that. It set me thinking." A rich smile warmed the lined face. "It made me think that a lot of rats were deserting a sinking ship, so I took my fears to a friend of mine in the Cabinet. Probably he made proper use of my suspicions. Bad business, wasn't it?"

"Shocking," agreed Sexton Blake. It was a strange sidelight on political affairs that a trend could be marked and plotted by reason of heavy purchases of diamonds. What was more to the point was that Brille's statement that the money had been invested in diamonds was true, and what was still more to the point was that the stones had not been thrown on the London market. Either they had been stolen, as Brille had declared, or there had been trickery. In any event the detective now knew that he had not embarked on a wild-goose chase. His information was correct in its essentials. He thanked old Isaac and returned to Baker Street.

Blake's mission to Monsieur

Chadagne had borne a small crop of rotten fruit. Brille was as he had declared himself to be, a rich landowner heavily engaged in the prime industries of his native province. In regard to Jules, the man was known to the Sureté under several aliases, one of which happened to be Cambert, the name he was now using. Chadagne's memory had record of three convictions on confidence charges.

There was no record of a theft of jewellery, but Sexton Blake was not to be misled by the worn-out theory that a criminal sticks to one line of endeavour. He had no reason to believe that Jules might not take a flutter in diamonds. The point for speculation was whether Count Brille knew that his servant was an ex-convict and, if so, why he had taken him into his employ. The original query also required investigation: who was the master and who the servant? Judging from his own observations Sexton Blake was disinclined to think that Brille served anybody but himself.

Again using a bus Sexton Blake and Tinker called on Suzanne Langtac at the Hotel Splendide. The marquise turned out to be a beautiful young French lady with all the characteristics of her race, volatile, wordy, vivacious, like a creature on wires with all her passions and thoughts apparently bubbling on the surface; but, as Blake well knew, capable of deep underlying strata of thought and intense feelings so typical of her race. Blake stated his mission and mentioned Count Brille by way of credentials.

She sprang to her feet, taut and mistrusting.

"But, monsieur, I have already set the inquiry on foot. Everything marches!"

"Do you mean the police—the English police?"

That startled her.

"But no, monsieur, it is an affair of the utmost secrecy." Her pretty face

clouded. "It is not an affair of honour for a French woman."

Blake was surprised at her statement. He had expected to find the woman of the same kidney as Brille, but there was something different here, something he did not understand which might throw an entirely different complexion on the sorry business.

"With whom, madame?"

She shook her head, a mass of beautifully arranged curls and waves of jet-black hair. "That I cannot say."

So there was a second inquiry under way. Sexton Blake was annoyed.

"But surely—why be so secretive?"

She got energetically to her feet and darted across the room, flinging the curtain aside with a swift, clutching movement, and looked into the street. The detective watched her. She seemed to be debating a course, turned round suddenly and looked steadily at Blake and then at Tinker, as if she would make certain she was not dealing with rogues. Sexton Blake, she knew by reason of his international reputation, but of his methods and character she knew nothing. With that curious insight which always marked Blake he seemed to get at her troubles and aim a shaft truly to the mark.

"Madame, possibly you distrust me because I am commissioned in this inquiry by Count Brille?"

She started visibly; her gaze became more intense.

"I have not said so."

"But, madame, your expression, your preoccupation, everything leads me to think that my visit is not opportune, that you have misgivings. As you do not know me or any poor reputation I possess for straightforward dealings I can only conclude that Count Brille is the cause of the mistrust. I suggest you give me your confidence."

"Confidence!" She repeated the word in a shrill voice, sharp with fear. "I am a woman, monsieur, not used to trickery." Suddenly her face con-

torted with passion. She strode up and down the room in the most extraordinary manner, her arms waving and clutching with her fingers at her hair as if she would tear it out by the roots. "I hate it, monsieur! Hate it! Do you understand? Hate it!"

"I think I do," Blake said quietly, and Tinker watched the distracted woman with wide-open eyes. "Can you tell me something of this man Count Brille?" Thinking it might resolve a difficult situation he added that he had just become aware of the fact that Jules, the count's servant, was a man with a prison record in France.

She flung a question hotly at him.

"Then why do you have dealings with Count Raoul de Brille?"

It was a direct question requiring a direct answer, but Sexton Blake was not prepared to tell the woman frankly that he had decided to go into the business for no other reason than to pit his brains against a man who had had the impudence to come to him with no other intention, as far as he could judge, than to use him as a cloak for his own schemes. The detective sought by subtlety to ease the woman's mind as to his own position.

"Madame, I am a detective. Count Brille, as I understand the matter, came to me not on his own behalf, but as the mouthpiece of seven people anxious to recover a fortune in diamonds. He states the diamonds were stolen in Salisbury. The circumstances surrounding the purchase of these stones in Paris and the decision to bring them into this country are matters for your own consciences. The diamonds have not been sold on the London market, therefore we can conclude that they are being fearfully and secretly held by the thief. Who that thief is I propose to find out. Naturally I must interview the seven principals in the matter; therefore I come to you."

She had listened with close attention. Some of the clouded anger disappeared from her face.

"You Englishmen always speak fair," she conceded. "But—" She hesitated. "No, I can tell you nothing! Monsieur"—and again the vivacious woman leaped to her feet, standing very rigid before her chair—"I am in a position of the most difficult. I—Marquise Langtac—am—ah, merde—I am of all women the most miserable."

Blake tossed a sighting shot lightly from his bow.

"You are penniless, perhaps, madame?"

Tinker looked around the richly furnished room and wondered if his master had taken temporary leave of his senses.

But the woman, raising her distracted face, shook her head heavily and tears sprang to her eyes.

"It is worse than that, but—why should I tell you my troubles?"

"Many people have confided their troubles to me, madame," Blake said quietly, and again she looked steadily at him, probingly, as if she would get behind the words of this man who most evidently was a Somebody and learn if any humanity rested behind his arching brow. Or was he the typical detective, remorseless, a hunter of men—and women—who would brush her aside when she had served his purpose as so much feminine rubbish interfering with his mission? His voice had a strange attraction. It reminded her of the curé in the village by her home, softly urging, waiting patiently for her confession, despite the sternness which informed some of his words; but then, the curé could be stern on occasion, too, and always for her own good.

Blake spoke again.

"Perhaps at the moment, madame, you are dependent on the bounty of Count Brille, and you find it irksome?"

Her eyes shot wide open.

"You know?" The words came breathing through her red lips, loaded with incredulity. Then her mood changed again, hot with scorn, all the

mistrust welling up once more in her tell-tale eyes. "You are Count Brille's jackal!" she flung at him.

Sexton Blake quickly put a period to that sort of thing.

"Madame," he said sternly, "supposing you be less theatrical. This is a simple matter, surely? What your motive was in entering into this scheme is easily discernible. You got information from Bartot that France would fall and so you cut your stick and came to England, turning much of your fortune into diamonds. Count Brille was entrusted with the package of diamonds and according to his statement the diamonds were stolen. Eight people were immediately concerned and you cannot tap the Paris diamond market to this extent without the transaction becoming pretty well known. As a matter of fact, it was reported to London. Thus the scope for an enterprising thief was wide. It is the usual sort of thing I deal with from day to day in the ordinary course of my profession."

He was very matter-of-fact, if somewhat scathing, and his words had a quieting effect on the young lady.

"I am nobody's jackal!" he said sternly, and she bit her lips uncertainly. Then he continued in an even voice: "As the result of this theft you unfortunately find yourself penniless. Count Brille, possibly feeling a sense of responsibility, places his purse at your disposal and"—he looked round the room—"in no niggardly manner."

Blake knew he had not stated the position as he knew it to be, but he had to bring this volatile woman down to earth, and he was not particularly concerned as to how he did it.

Her Latin urge for the theatrical could not be denied.

"Must I bare my soul to you?"

Tinker chuckled to himself. This was as good as Bette Davis in her most tremendous role. The "soul" business laugh. Madame la Marquise's soul, as

far as he could see, liked to be housed sumptuously and set with diamonds.

"I think you must give me your confidence," Blake said. "After all, the theft of these diamonds is really a matter for the police. I am not sure—"

"No! Not that! Not the police!"

"If I cannot have your confidence," Blake said firmly, "there is no alternative."

Slowly she raised her head and looked steadily at Sexton Blake. He knew at once that the battle was won.

She spoke in a low and tragic voice.

"I—shall—tell—you—everything."

CHAPTER 3.

The Counts.

IT was Sexton Blake's and Tinker's misfortune that day to have to listen to a strange and horrid story made all the more macabre and realistic in its grim details because the narrative fell from the lips of a beautiful girl, who, if her story could be believed, was as yet untouched by the aura of evil which surrounded Count Brille and his decadent satellites.

According to the Marquise Langtac, and she had the story in part from her deceased father, Brille was the son of a wild and profligate man who had cut a vicious swath through the more degenerate night life which came to a glorious zenith in the years preceding the Great War. Of the group of sycophants who surrounded this wicked man none remained except Henri de Chateauneuf, who, as has been seen, fell foul of the London authorities and was promptly escorted out of the country under the firm hand of Sexton Blake's good friend, Inspector Ed. Miller of Scotland Yard. The balance of the group interested in the diamond deal, Malsuite, Bazon, Schneider and Villats, were of much the same age as Brille, that is, in the

early thirties. Suzanne Langtac the detective judged to be a woman of about twenty-eight.

Again drawing on her father's tale, Suzanne told them of a wild and terrible business in the Rue Montparnasse in Paris, which, rumour said, had resulted in a murder and other things not to be mentioned. Just how these rich men were able to hush up the scandal was never revealed, but the fact remains that Count Brille was brought back to the chateau one dark night in a closely guarded ambulance. The local doctor was called in attendance and sworn to secrecy, but a loose and garrulous tongue over a bottle of wine one night started an ugly rumour throughout the countryside. The old Count Brille was suffering from gangrene. The gangrene was the result of fearful bites on his leg!

"The bites of an animal, Monsieur le Docteur?" the medico's confidant exclaimed.

"But—no!" And the doctor's voice, despite his wine-loosened tongue, was hushed to an awful whisper. "Human bites! By a monster!"

"Oh, come, Monsieur le Docteur, you are drunk! Monsters are an old woman's tale, not for educated men like us."

"Incisors like a wolf," insisted the doctor, "and gangrenous—foul—gas gangrene, it crackled under my hand as I pressed the skin of his leg. The old count's language was shocking—fearful language—blasphemy! Mon Dieu, we had to cut his leg off!"

A nice story to spread round the countryside regarding the wealthy Count Brille. Especially coming on top of that whispered business in Paris. The doctor's confidant pushed his hat back for greater comfort. His eyes were sticking out in glassy horror.

"Who did it?" he asked in an awful whisper.

The doctor ordered cognac this time, and swallowed the drink at a gulp.

"A woman," he whispered, and looked anxiously around him to note if he was being overheard. "A woman like no woman you ever saw. I was in the great hall. It was dark. You know the place, gloomy with black beams like a house of horrors I once saw in Paris. I saw her, just like a gorilla, hairy on the chest and long white limbs with big calloused knees."

"Did you see her face?"

"No, it was dark." The doctor wiped the sweat from his brow "Like something out of the inferno in that big book I have at home. You know the one. I screamed, I was overcome—unnerved—you know what I mean, seeing a thing like that. She went down on all fours, I swear it, her long, white limbs out behind her, and scampered through the great doors. They shut bang as if somebody had done it angrily. Then I heard a chain."

"A chain? I say, did you have cheese for supper last night?"

"I am telling you the solemn truth," said the doctor.

"Didn't she have any clothes on?"

"Yes, something like a short dress. I didn't notice, I was too frightened."

"What did they say about the count?"

"The major domo said it was a dog, one of the count's big mastiffs."

"A dog, eh? Oh, oh, that be hanged for a tale."

The doctor nodded fearfully, shook himself, and asked for another bottle of wine. Then he remembered how they had sworn him so fearfully to silence and given him a big fee, the biggest fee, a hundred times, he had ever earned in all his life.

"It's a lie!" he cried. "A lie! I was romancing. Too much wine!"

The weird story ran like fire round the countryside, gathered form and embellishment in the telling, until every head was wagging with the fearful business. Wild screams were heard from the gloomy chateau. At night peasants hurrying by the gloomy pile

crossed themselves and made strange signs to ward off the evil eye. The sordid imaginations of restricted village life cringed in the face of their own thoughts.

"Probably it had some foundation in fact?" suggested Sexton Blake, quickly shaking himself free from all thought of monsters and other gibberish of unsettled minds. "What do you think, marquise?"

Suzanne started with a quick shiver as the smaller muscles twitched involuntarily under the strain of jarred nerves. It was a tale she preferred not to tell.

"I don't know, Mr. Blake," she said flatly. "Nobody even knew that old Count Brille was married. Imagine the consternation when the news came out that the countess had died giving birth to a son. There was a law inquiry of some sort started by the old count's next-of-kin—as he thought—but the notary, Monsieur Bonsecours, brought forward all the necessary papers to prove the marriage and the legitimacy of the son. The doctor came from Paris. Then—but it is horrible, I——"

"Please go on!"

"You know what life is in French villages. The next day the rumour ran like wildfire that the countess was none other than this monster the local doctor claimed to have seen. Two nights later the doctor was called to attend the count's baby son. The— the doctor was never seen again, he——"

"Murdered?" cried Tinker, listening intently to the story.

"I don't know," she said blankly. "He was never seen again. Chateau Brille is an ancient place with dungeons and horrible underground prisons." Again Suzanne shuddered. "I wake up at night sometimes wondering if the doctor is hanging in chains in one of those—Ugh! He was a kindly man."

"On the night the doctor disappeared a small group of peasants went to the

graveyard." She crossed herself and shivered. "God have mercy on them, they broke into the de Brille vault and opened the coffin of the dead countess. It was—the coffin! I forgot to tell you—so very big, too big for a——"

"Too big for an ordinary person?" supplied Sexton Blake.

"Yes. These men took one look and then ran screaming from the graveyard. The body was hairy——" She came to a dead stop, unable to continue.

"Please! It may be important!"

"It was thick in the chest like an animal's, but the head—the head was lovely."

"Good heavens!" cried Blake.

"You are thinking of Count Brille?" she asked quickly.

"Of course I am."

"Yes," she said, all embracingly. "The next day there was a fire in the de Brille vault. The old count, they said, came down to the graveyard in a wheel-chair looking like the devil himself. He had men with him and carts full of faggots. They say he carried a long whip and swore at the men for their cowardice with fearful fluency. He forced them to place the faggots inside the vault and then he lighted them himself. There was nothing left in the morning."

Suzanne sat back looking timidly fearful now the story was done, not in the least like the imperious young woman who had tried to set Sexton Blake by the ears half an hour earlier.

"It is not a nice story," Blake remarked. "How about the young count, this Count Brille we know?"

Suzanne told them the young man, Raoul, never left the grounds of the chateau until he reached the age of fourteen.

"The old count died when Raoul was about six. He was looked after by an aunt and a young priest who attended to his education. Nobody went near the place and you could not get a peasant to pass the chateau grounds at

night even to this day. Even the gendarmes gave it a wide berth. When he was fourteen, a year before my own father died, there was a great fete at the Chateau Brille. The boy was dressed in a long silk cape which reached right to the floor. It was said he was a trifle lame and was sensitive about it. But, Mr. Blake, he was the most handsome boy in all France; really beautiful.

"I am a few years younger than Raoul, but my father talked to me about him that night. Of course, he knew all the stories about the de Brilles; in fact, rather more exactly than you might have expected; he had told me about their recent history, but in a sceptical manner as if to dismiss everything as gossip for village louts and old women. My father thought the boy should be given a chance among his own class in the neighbourhood. I thought it was kind of father. After some persuasion Raoul came to visit us, and after that he was a continual visitor at Chateau Langtac. Mr. Blake, in his good moods, he was the most delightful companion for a girl, lovely manners and clever in his conversation. He was sensitive about his hideous deformity, but I managed to talk him out of that. He would never bathe with us in the lake, but I knew he could swim like an otter. His arms and hands are abnormally powerful."

"How do you know he swims?"

She answered at once.

"I saw him in the river, but he did not see me. His arms are so powerful his chest comes right out of the water with each stroke. His chest is hairy like a dog's, although his neck is perfect as you have seen."

Blake nodded gravely. It was corroborative of those almost unbelievable stories.

"You said, marquise, that he was well-mannered in his good moods. How about his bad moods? Excuse me for pressing you on a distasteful subject, but I must have a complete picture."

She shuddered.

"A fiend! I only saw him like that once. Dogs don't like him. They attack him. He—it was awful that day, our dog, Pierre, an airedale, came for him, and he—Mr. Blake, he is not a bit frightened, he— Well, he seemed to relish the attack. When the dog came forward, not swiftly like a dog snapping at a man, but slowly, sensing a fight, I screamed. The dog took no notice of me, coming forward in the ways dogs do, stiff-legged, eyes glaring. I looked at Raoul and then I ran. He was on his hands and knees like an animal. His forearms were stiff like a dog's and his fingers were curved like talons. The gardener told me afterwards that Pierre had been killed in a fight with another dog, his throat was torn out, but—but I knew.

"The next day Raoul came to me with some beautiful flowers and a still more beautiful apology. I made a mistake, I could see nothing but those thick fingers which had torn the throat out of Pierre. I was the only one who could do anything with Raoul, but I was angry and frightened and I sent him away. I never saw him again until I was over twenty and we had business dealings."

"Can you fill in the intervening years?" Blake asked.

"Not very well, it is such a nightmare," she said listlessly. "Horrible years they were. The priest who was educating him came screaming out of the grounds one day and fell in a swoon in the village street. His thigh had been savagely torn by those same fingers that had savaged the dog. He was afraid to say who had done it. There were other stories just as bad. Then, when he was about eighteen, old Chateaufort, who is a horrible man, set to work on Raoul. If the truth were told Chateaufort learned from Raoul, not vice versa. There were wild parties and wilder stories of beastliness which never reach a woman's ears except as

vague hints. Then we met in business matters."

It transpired that all the mining interests owned by this group of seven people were operated in a sort of cartel centralised in Brille's offices at Nancy. Count Brille himself was an extremely wealthy man, not fabulously rich, but possessed of a considerable fortune. Suzanne, it appeared, had long enjoyed a large income from the cartel, but, in common with many French women who frequent Paris society, her personal banking account was in a continual state of overdraft. When the decision came to turn the liquid assets of the cartel into diamonds she had little to say about things, the control resting with Count Brille. Her own interest in the diamonds amounted to about £100,000, and the interests of the others, excepting Count Brille, were for lesser amounts. When she reached London she had no money beyond a few hundred pounds and her personal jewellery valued at about £2,000. To a woman of her social position this was poverty. Count Brille had stepped into the breach by allowing her ample funds on a week to week basis.

"I think we are running ahead a trifle too fast," suggested Sexton Blake. "You are engaged to Monsieur Bartot, are you not?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"In a sort of a way."

Again there were reticences. Patiently Blake got the truth from her. Bartot, contrary to his expectations, was a member of the vicious Count Brille group. The infamous story of impending defeat had come to Brille, at a price she understood, before she knew a thing about it. She herself had supposed that the Maginot Line was so immensely strong France would never be in any danger.

The ugly fact of the business was that Count Brille was demanding marriage, and she had flung herself into the arms of the opportunist, Bartot, to

safeguard herself from Count Brille's demand. Blake judged she was not a woman to go to work in a munitions plant or some other war activity to keep herself clean from this crippled pervert. Without money life to her would be ended. Thus, with Brille holding the purse-strings she deemed herself to be tied hand and foot.

"I think," she said slowly, "the diamonds were never stolen at all. Raoul de Brille wants me and this is his method. He merely commissioned you to look into the affair to save his face before the rest of us."

"I see," Blake said gravely, and made no suggestion that he had already examined that hypothesis. There were many angles to the affair, not the least of which were this infamous man, Bartot, and his ready to hand aviator, Lieutenant Ladoux.

CHAPTER 4.

Punch Bennett Muscles In.

AS Sexton Blake had expected he found no difficulty whatever in ascertaining the whereabouts of Lieutenant Rene Ladoux. A word to a high official at the Air Ministry and the information was obtained in a matter of minutes. The Frenchman was stationed at LX aerodrome in charge of a group of ground men, his age being over the limit for combat work.

"Do you know anything about him?" Blake asked.

The official smiled.

"You being who you are, Mr. Blake, I think I should turn the question round and ask you if you know anything about Mr. Ladoux. Supposing you look at his record card?" He passed over the card.

"Oh, I just want to have a chat with him," Blake said easily. He read the card. "The man seems all right from your point of view, age 34, good record,

2,100 flying hours, expert on super-charging machines, and had the good grace to fly his machine to England and join the Fighting French when his country capitulated. Probably a valuable man."

"Come on, Blake," urged the official. Sexton Blake kept a few secrets from high officials in the Government as long as his inquiry was not affected by a confidence. "The chap faked a crash landing last May at Salisbury Plain to land a curious Frenchman and a still more curious package of diamonds. The diamonds are missing. Ladoux probably did the job for a price."

"That doesn't look good. Men who have their price are not particularly welcome round our aerodromes."

"No." Sexton Blake rose. "Strange business; I'll let you know if Ladoux is not a proper person."

"Thanks!"

Blake took his leave of the Air Ministry official and this time he used the Grey Panther. LX aerodrome was a good many miles away and he wished to get there and back before the black-out, when country roads with no signposts had a habit of turning back on themselves and sentries were not particularly helpful to lost travellers. He arrived at the station at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, parked his car and strode towards the headquarters building with Tinker. It had been a tiresome trip and might end in one of those useless inquiries which are the bane of detectives.

Entering the building he got the surprise of his life. Coming from the commanding officer's room was a man in flying togs, a tall fellow with a big nose and out-thrust chin, whom nobody could forget, least of all Sexton Blake. Punch Bennett had muscled in on too many of Blake's inquiries to make his appearance an undisguised blessing. On this occasion, however, there was no possible chance of this cheerful free-booter making a nuisance of himself, he was safely in flying togs at an R.A.F.

aerodrome. At least, so Sexton Blake thought.

Blake and Tinker watched Punch join a young man under military age who wore a saucy grin and looked at the big airman with reverence.

Punch was grinning.

"I wangled it okay, Smithy. Now, cut along and you know what to do. I'll join you as soon as I can get out of this flying suit."

Sexton Blake strode forward. Wherever Punch turned up he would be wangling things. It was the nature of the gentleman. Blake stuck out his hand.

"By thunder! Punch Bennett! How are you?" For once he could be absolutely affable with no reservations. "What have you wangled this time?"

There was an instant of hesitation as if Punch had met up with the last person he wanted to see, then he stuck out his big hand and his large smile left nothing to be desired.

"The old sleuth! Well, if this isn't top-hole! Spot of work down here, some blighter been half-inching the Government petrol?" He grabbed Tinker's hand with his left. "Hallo hero!" It was a name he had awarded to Tinker after a particularly hazardous escapade on the top of an aeroplane.

Whatever Punch might do to annoy them, Tinker never wavered in his liking for the cheerful airman even when it became his duty to do him in the eye on instructions from his chief.

"Are you clawing them down, Punch?"

Punch's face fell.

"The finest collection of blithering idiots is holed up at the Air Ministry. I am exactly one year, three months, and"—he looked at the calendar—"four days over age for combat duty according to the book of words. 'I'm a ruddy test pilot.'"

"A pretty hazardous job," smiled Blake, knowing how Punch must have felt when he had been refused for

combat duty. To Sexton Blake's certain knowledge he was one of the best all-round pilots in England, as he had discovered to his own discomfiture on one occasion.

"Hazardous, my eye," growled Punch. "Anything I can do to help you round here?"

"I'm looking for a Frenchman named Ladoux; Lieutenant Rene Ladoux."

For one fleeting second Punch's serenity deserted him as he looked narrowly at Sexton Blake, but the broad grin never left his face. "By Jove, Ladoux!"

"Do you know him?"

"Oh, yes, sparkling sort of chap, French and all that sort of thing. He's a supercharging wallah or some such rot. I gave him a spot of help the other day. What's Ladoux been doing? Swiping the silver in the officers' mess?"

"Not exactly," smiled Blake.

"I should say not," said Punch heartily. "Nickled iron, I've examined the stuff."

"Is he on the station to-day?"

Punch looked at his watch, but there was a far away calculating depth to his eyes.

"Probably knocking off just now, but if you hurry you might just catch him. I'm not saying you will, you know, but then again, old sleuth, I'm not saying you won't. Chap of your attainments should, if you get what I mean." He gently shepherded the pair towards the commanding officer's room. "Wing-Commander Poole's the chap you want. In there. Not very bright and a bit on the stuffy side between you and me, but sound, very sound."

Sexton Blake chuckled.

"Is he the man you just wangled?"

"Oh, grandma, what big ears you have!" Punch's grin came off his face. "Tell it not in Gath. Old Poole's not bright, a bit shy above the eyebrows, if you follow me. Not up to our stan-

dard at all." The grin returned. He said impudently: "You and I always find these pompous guys a bit on the easy side, eh, when we get down to brass tacks. Well, got to be legging it. Nice seeing you and all that sort of thing. Matter of national importance calls me, frightfully hush-hush. I'll probably be seeing you soon. So long, Hero!" and he was gone down the passageway.

Sexton Blake, always observant, noticed Punch did not bother to change out of his flying suit. This hardly accorded with the remark he had made to Smithy. He watched the big fellow legging it across the field to the parking lot as if time was distinctly an object in whatever enterprise might be entertaining him at the moment.

"We had better do things officially," he said to Tinker, and strolled into Wing-Commander Poole's room and presented his high credentials. The commander came up to Punch's advance notices, over forty, pompous, his chest ablaze with ribbons, doubtless most hardily earned in the crates they used to call flying machines during the Great War.

Poole examined Blake's letter from the ministry.

"Quite in order, Mr. Blake, and an honour to receive this visit. What can I do for you?"

Blake, still thinking of Punch, made a light remark.

"I see you have a test pilot named Bennett. A remarkable man in the air."

Instantly Wing-Commander Poole's face frosted like a stagnant pool.

"Blasted nuisance!" he barked.

"All of that," laughed Blake, "but a remarkable man in the air and—well an incorrigible good fellow with a lot of loose ideas."

"Just laid the chap off for two months, if you want to know. Sorry if he's a friend of yours."

"What's Punch been up to this time?"

"Studied disobedience and blatant disregard of orders!" snapped Poole. Tinker had the misfortune to laugh.

"Sorry, sir," he covered up, "but that is Punch's long suit. What did he do?"

Blake was keeping a straight face but chuckling to himself. He rather thought Punch had done this frosty gentleman properly in the eye. Evidently what he had wangled was a two-month's lay-off.

Wing-Commander Poole pulled a paper towards him and angrily shook it out.

"No discipline at all. This is what happened. He took—stole would be a better word—several belts of ammunition from stores, went up in one of these new Spitfires he was testing, and shot down one of the very latest German fighters."

"By Jove!" cried Tinker enthusiastically, "did he get a wiggling for that?"

Poole awarded the young man a frosty glance dripping with icicles.

"Test pilots are here for testing, young man, not interfering with operations." Poole's face took on a choleric hue. "When I had him on the carpet he laughed at me. Laughed at me! Imagine the blasted impudence. Then he said he did it for a bet of ten-and-six with Churchill—"

"Quite possibly on the cards," said Blake, amused. "Punch gets around. I've seen him at the Palace."

"The man was talking bosh!" snapped Poole reassuring himself. "I ten-and-sixpenced him. Laid the chap off for two months and he—hang it, sir, I'm sorry if he is a friend of yours—he just laughed at me and said—er—objectionable things. Nothing you can do with a chap like that at all. He had the infernal impudence to tell me to go to Madame Tussaud's and get a wax dummy made of myself. He said all a

commanding officer has to do is look like it, and I flatter myself—but, no matter! What can I do for you, Mr. Blake?"

Blake was keeping his face straight with an effort and Tinker was industriously occupying himself looking out of the window with his back to Poole.

"I want to have a chat with a Frenchman on your strength, a man named Rene Ladoux."

"Been up to something?"

"Nothing against the chap at all," Blake assured him. "I want some information about a matter which originated in France."

Poole had the good sense to appreciate that Blake was not to be drawn. He depressed a key in his telephone box and barked into it:

"Wing-Commander Poole speaking. Send Rene Ladoux to see me. He's in the machine shop, super-charger division."

It was evident that Poole for all his pomposity knew the whereabouts of his men.

A minute elapsed and a voice came through the loud speaker.

"Squadron-Leader Cotton here, sir, about Ladoux. He's just gone on ten days' leave, just a few minutes ago. I've sent an orderly to see if I can catch him."

Two minutes later the blow fell clean on Sexton Blake's unsuspecting head.

"Squadron-Leader Cotton again, sir! Ladoux left two minutes ago with Test Pilot Bennett. They went by car."

Immediately Sexton Blake's face was as black as thunder. Echoing in his mind was Suzanne's remark that she had already set an inquiry on foot.

"Bennett's done us both in the eye, commander," he snapped, which was small comfort to either of them. "Come along, Tinker!"

Leaving the astonished officer staring dumbfounded, they raced out of the room and legged it for the Grey Panther. Punch, they learned, was driving

a Morris "8," and they were able to pick up some meagre directions as to the route he had taken.

At 9 o'clock that night an exceedingly dispirited Sexton Blake, in company with Tinker, arrived at Baker Street.

Seated in Blake's own chair, the detective's decanter in front of him and his baccy jar conveniently to hand, was Punch Bennett, a large smile of welcome on his face.

"Matey sort of place you have here, old sleuth," he observed cheerily.

Sexton Blake stood on the threshold and glared at the incorrigible fellow. Even Pedro was perfectly contented, nosing his big head up at the airman to have his ears fondled.

CHAPTER 5.

A Tentative Partnership.

SEXTON BLAKE, out of the depths of his long experience with Punch Bennett, knew that when that gentleman was trying to appear most patently at ease, he was really very ill at ease. After deliberately annoying the detective that afternoon, and then having the effrontery to turn up at Baker Street as large as life, meant just one thing: Punch wanted something badly and he had the consummate conceit to think he could wheedle that something out of Sexton Blake. The detective could always out-think Punch, but in any dealings he had with the man he preferred to hold him on a short leash. There was a probability he could use Punch's strange talents in the inquiry now unfolding, but he might be taking a fearful chance.

This devil-may-care adventurer with the large grin on his face lacked the steadiness which marked Tinker in an investigation. In a pinch Punch moved with bewildering speed. He jockeyed for position like a top rider in a horse-face. It was this suddenness and

precipitate action which Blake feared, although, on the credit side, he had to confess that the big man had a supreme ability for moving out of a jam with brilliant audacity. One day, Blake was sure, Punch would fling himself headlong into a catastrophe from which neither he nor anybody else would be able to extricate him.

As Sexton Blake had discovered to himself on more than one occasion, anger with Punch was so much spume flung against a rock. There was more to be obtained from him in the light-hearted give-and-take in which he excelled. He could not, however, quite keep back his just annoyance.

His voice was edged with sarcasm as he inquired whether Punch found the whisky and tobacco to his liking.

The big man's air of injured innocence was marvellous.

"Oh, by Jove, not the matey tone at all," he moaned. "Here I am, at the feet of Gamaliel, as it were—the Apostle St. Paul's schoolmaster, y'know—I had an excellent bringing up."

"That's reassuring. I suppose you know that Gamaliel was a doctor of the law school of Hillel?"

Tinker chuckled.

"By Jove," said Punch, apparently awed, but you never knew with him, "my Aunt Minnie would love to know that. Great collector of odds and ends of Biblical knowledge. Is Hillel in Palestine?"

"Hillel," smiled Blake, "was a Jewish scholar of great distinction. He was president of the Sanhedrin."

"Quite a guy," said Punch cheerfully, not in the least perturbed. "Now, as I was saying when you got down to the profundities, here I am in the nature of a client, as it were."

"Clients pay fees," Blake said shortly.

"And right in the poor bloke's eye he tossed a rotten egg," grinned Punch. "No professional etiquette at all, eh, Hero?" he said to Tinker.

"If we ever got a fee from you, Punch,

I'd frame it," was Tinker's quick rejoinder.

"Really, Blake old sleuth—really," moaned Punch. "Just lower your weary carcass into a chair and let's pool the doings. Conference between great minds, eh, what?"

"If I may have my own chair?"

Punch got up.

"Of course—er—naturally, great mind in the big chair and all that sort of thing." He sat on a Windsor arm-chair. "I like something firm to the seat, Spartan, if you get the classical allusion."

"The classics, too," smiled Blake, with appropriate awe. He seated himself and leisurely filled his pipe. As soon as Punch was finished with the frills he might say something worth while. He lighted the pipe and mingled the blue smoke with the similar aroma coming from Punch's short briar. "Now, Punch, is this the old, old story with a new setting?"

"You are not alluding to that stupid Benjamin Tolton affair?" asked Punch, with a reasonably injured air. "Nasty piece of work, Tolton." He was not anxious to discuss that cloudy business. He had rather done good old Sexton in the eye; at least, he thought he had.

"That and one or two other jobs where you crossed my path."

"But think of the thumping fees you gathered into the Blake coffers? Just crumbs came my way, old chap—sort of Lazarus and the rich man's table idea. Positively!"

"Then I take it you are horning in on this Count Brille affair?"

Trust Sexton Blake to hit the nail on the head. Then it was the Brille affair. He had thought as much, but he wanted to know where Blake stood. He hitched his chair forward, suddenly serious.

"You don't mean to say you are employing the undoubted Blake talents on behalf of that excrescence, Count de Brille? Really, old maestro, not in

your form at all. Keep the game clean, and that sort of thing. I'm dead serious, really. Brille is a cross between an elephant and a slug, mostly slug. To be perfectly frank, I'm all set to do the poisonous bloke in the eye."

Blake winced. One thing about Punch, apart from his many lapses from the straight and narrow path, he had a shrewd common sense which was particularly emphasised in his unerring ability to pick out a wrong 'un. He looked shrewdly at the man, and saw that his face for once was set in serious lines. His expression gave the lie to the extravagances of his conversation. Now he would have to justify his own position.

"You, I take it, have a commission from the lovely Suzanne?"

"What a girl! What tresses! What beauty in distress!"

Quite purposely it was no answer, but it would have to do.

"I found her a particularly tiresome young woman with a lot of loose ideas about a number of things."

"You've seen her then?"

"For one exasperating hour," Blake told him. "Then I went to the aerodrome, and I think you know the rest."

"Sketchily, quite sketchily, old chap," said Punch, fairly serious. "I will say I put two and two together, what with you asking about Ladoux, and——"

"And it totalled two million pounds?" Blake asked.

"Old age comes to all men," said Punch, still sparring for a weak point to slip in his own proposition.

"And I take it your plan is to hijack the lot?"

To Sexton Blake's surprise Punch nodded enthusiastically:

"Quite! Of course, we'll have to give little Suzanne her hundred thousand."

"We, eh?" Blake eyed him narrowly. They were getting to the milk

in the usual shabby coconut Punch brought with him. "Do you expect me to join you in a criminal enterprise?"

Again Punch nodded, and Tinker was amazed at his confidence in the face of all the annoyances he had caused Sexton Blake in the past. He had known the airman to horn in on some staggering deals, his ideas based almost entirely on the loose principles of a pirate, and here he was confidently expecting an arrangement. Sexton Blake would never countenance even the appearance of flagrant dishonesty, despite the fact that he knew he was dealing with a group of decadent scoundrels.

Blake spoke thoughtfully:

"I'll be quite plain with you, Punch." I have accepted a commission from Count Brille to recover this parcel of diamonds for the curious reason—that Brille is trying to use me to cook a noisome stew for his own foul pleasure."

"Ah-ha!" laughed Punch. "I see the eagle mind has caught on to the putridity."

"Exactly! But because I have accepted the commission, I shall endeavour to recover the stones and deliver them to Brille. That is the only way I can devise to thwart his further schemes."

Punch shook his head in some amusement.

"Having me on, eh? A guy with your scent for trickery must know that the diamonds never were stolen. Brille has the stones."

"And so you kidnap Ladoux to prove it to yourself?"

"Just reassurance," said Punch, not quite so convincingly.

But Blake was not the man to rush his fences in this loose manner.

"There are certain aspects of the situation which might lead one to your conclusion." His face firmed, and he spoke with unexpected heat. "When

I have delivered the stones to Brille, or uncovered his own villainy, and taken precautions to spike the foul scheme with Suzanne Langtac, I shall lift neither hand nor foot to inquire further into the matter. I warn you, though; Punch, that stealing diamonds even from a swine like Brille is an indictable offence, and may earn you a long stretch in an English prison."

Punch ran true to form.

"Are diamonds hard to fence?"

"Don't be foolish, man! If Suzanne has employed you for a fee, let it go at that, and don't soil your hands with plain theft."

"Spoken like a good man and true," grinned Punch. "You know, Blake, old brain, I think you are being dashed matey. Supposing we agitate the grey matter and have a look at the doings, eh—what?"

Sexton Blake was inclined to accept the situation as it stood. He knew Punch, and could trust him to play along, all open and above board, until that precise moment when the diamonds had been recovered and he had retired from the scene. If Blake discovered that Brille actually had the stones in his possession he thought his mission would be accomplished, but he was determined to see that Suzanne got fair treatment. If, at that point, Punch decided to embark on plain crime, just for the fun of it, that was the concern of the official police. Knowing what he did about this diabolical fiend, Count Brille, he was convinced that the smiling giant across the room from him was cheerfully embarking on a foolish enterprise which might end in fearful catastrophe.

That Brille would stop at murder, and a particularly fiendish murder at that, was not to be entertained for one minute. He and his sycophants were of that low and shocking type which guaranteed that a killing would be the lightest part of the punishment Punch

was building up for himself. These men would descend to the hideous sadism of the Spanish Inquisition in its most horrible days.

In the meantime, he would work along with Punch, and do all he could to stop him from going ahead with the more foolhardy part of the job he had mapped out for himself. He could not feel annoyed with the man. Punch was attracted by the little god, Adventure, and he was quite capable of sending the swag to the Red Cross Society, of course, keeping liberal expenses for himself.

"I am prepared to look into the—er—doings with you, Punch," he announced gravely. "Mind you, this inquiry begins and ends with the recovery of the jewels, and the protection of Suzanne Langtac."

"By Jove!" cried Punch enthusiastically. "Blake and Bennett, Limited!"

"Exceedingly limited," smiled Blake. "How about Ladoux?"

"Ah, yes—Ladoux!" mumbled Punch, anchored nastily at the real point at issue that night.

He knew that in any arrangement with the famous detective he would have to take orders, not give them. The Ladoux business that day had not been conducive to the inspiration of any confidence in him, and he had to wriggle out of it as best he could.

"You know, with me a carefully engineered plan has to go forward like a piece of staff work. You see that—or no? Well, there it was, not knowing, of course, that a famous guy like you would beetle into the doings, and so I had to push it through. You see, the hook was baited, and old Poole, the wing commander, is a guy with no imagination. Then you came on the scene, and lo and behold you wanted a chin-chin with Ladoux. Lucky no end." Punch looked cheerily round the room, and discovered his audience was not sympathetic regard-

ing his apparent difficulties. "You see, I had to think quickly. Obviously I had to get in touch with you once I had this Ladoux chap under lock and key——"

"Do you mean to tell me you've kidnapped Ladoux and imprisoned him?"

Punch nodded sadly.

"A chap can't be in two places at once, can he? You know, Blake, I thought the fellow might bite young Smithy, so I chucked him in the cellar. Things to do, you see, not the least important of which was this chin with you. Ladoux can wait but Sexton Blake can't sort of idea."

"And it is your suggestion that I come with you and examine Ladoux?"

"I can serve him up on ice any time you like."

Blake frowned. This man would land him in situations which he did not wish to contemplate. By some manner of means Punch had kidnapped Ladoux and locked him up. It was quite on the cards that the Frenchman might go to the police as soon as he was released. If Blake were to go with Punch and question Ladoux it was also on the cards that Ladoux might represent him as the real instigator of this piece of lawlessness. Already he was beginning to regret this loose arrangement with Punch. His excellent standing with Scotland Yard did not run to flagrant law breaking.

"I think I prefer to keep out of it."

"Right ho!" said Punch, perceiving Sexton Blake's unexpressed difficulties on the instant. The law was not likely to bother him until he met up with it face to face, and even then he usually had a few cards up his sleeve. "I'll give you a buzz or be seeing you tomorrow."

"Thanks," said Blake dryly. He was not misled by the look on Punch's face and knew it would not be the big man's fault if he failed to get a statement out of Ladoux. That part was easy. What Punch did not understand was

that the crippled count and his friends had a lot of nasty ideas about transgressing the law which would make even Punch shiver in his shoes.

CHAPTER 6.

Smithy on Guard.

PUNCH BENNETT, with his usual urge for holing up in out-of-the-way places, had made his headquarters in a dilapidated farmhouse in Buckinghamshire which included a large barn in which he had housed his famous green aeroplane, now apparently bedded down for the duration of the war. Smithy, the taciturn ragamuffin Punch had rescued from some East End slum and carefully schooled in his ways until he was a faithful and even worshipping servant, had been left in charge of Lieutenant Rene Ladoux.

Smithy's conscience, if he had one, was flimsily anchored in any stray ethics Punch might still possess. If his master decided to bring home a French master mechanic from the aerodrome and lock him in the cellar, that was quite in order with Smithy. The cellar was of reinforced concrete, possessed no window except an iron grating through which Ladoux could not have stuck his foot, and was further secured by a door of bolted oak, four inches thick, kept in place by an iron bar of massive proportions. A small judas in the door no more than six inches square enabled Smithy to pass food into the room.

Ladoux, having received a good dinner before Punch introduced him to the cellar, was quiet, and Smithy presumed he was making good and proper use of the iron bedstead he had placed in the room. In any event he was sitting in the kitchen before a coal fire, his nose in a thriller magazine, his eyes nearly popping out of his head, oblivious to everything except his story, not realising that it was the merest

child's play compared with some of the hair-raising adventures he had shared with his own boss. Ladoux for the time being had ceased to exist as far as Smithy was concerned. Adding eerie atmosphere to his gripping story the wind howled through the ancient house tormenting the walls into moans and cracks like the cries of animals in pain.

Startling as summer thunder when the lightning has been lost in the sunlight, a hollow tap came to the back door. Smithy's hair almost stood on end. That was not Punch's tap, and who in thunder could be visiting the house at this time of night? His head, throbbing with fierce excitement caused by accompanying his particular thriller hero along a dark and noisome tunnel swarming with hidden dangers, he was in no shape to combat a danger which was always in the offing when Punch was on adventure bent. In a piping voice he challenged the disturber of his solitude.

"Who—is—it?"

A muffled voice came from outside the door.

"Sentry! Open up!"

At the moment it was doubtful if Smithy would have opened up for a field-marshal, let alone a sentry. He shot a quick glance at the boarded windows, further shrouded with heavy sacking, and decided there had been no infringement of the blackout regulations.

"Aw, run away and play marbles!" shrilled Smithy, gathering courage.

"Open up or I fire!"

"Blimy!" whistled Smithy all to himself, "a blinking invasion and me with that cove in the cellar." He had to temporise. "Arf a blinking minute, I ain't got no clogs on," he fibbed in what seemed a good cause. If the sentry outside happened to be of the nosy kind he was for it; and properly. Snatching up a powerful torch he scampered upstairs to a window overlooking

the back door. Noiselessly he slung it up. "Advance and show yerself, sentry!" he piped, figuring this was impressive military stuff.

The man in the darkness looked upwards, and Smithy made out dimly a white face. Into the middle of that oval of white he shot the rays of his torch and then let them travel down the man's person. He was a civilian, and instead of carrying a bayoneted rifle he held an automatic in his hand.

"You're a blinking liar!" shrilled Smithy. "'Op it or I'll set the dogs on you. Four dogs!" he added for greater comfort. "The fiercest dogs in the blooming country. Man killers!"

Smithy slung the window down and stood there shivering. If he had only possessed one dog, even a fox-terrier, he would have felt happier. He raced downstairs to the kitchen on the basis that a lighted room was more conducive to resolving his racing fears than that great house with its dark and dismal passages. Speedily he checked over his defences and realised they were woefully slender. Punch never permitted him a pistol. The kitchen was fairly safe, but he knew, with his first-hand knowledge of first-story stuff, that the upstairs was as vulnerable as a chicken coop. What was more, he had thoughtlessly left a ladder by the kitchen door, to-morrow being another day with Smithy and tidiness not being one of his habits.

The question now was whether to put out the light and hide himself upstairs or do his best to barricade the kitchen and stay with the cheerful light. What would Punch do? He had the answer to that in half a tick. Punch would put the light out and then open the door preparatory to taking on all comers in a free-for-all. Smithy took cognisance of his skinny arms and decided that course would be a free-for-the-other-guy as far as he was concerned.

His mind dwelt gloomily on the man in the basement room. It's a blinking

rescue, he decided, and looked desperately at the clock as if by some mental effort he could advance the hour of Punch's return from London. Too well he knew that his master could not be back at the farmhouse for at least another hour.

From outside came ominous sounds, and the lad knew that the ladder had been found and was about to be put to use. He heard it thud against the wall by the window through which he had just reconnoitred. All right, he thought, his mind reverting to one of his favourite yarns of the Middle Ages, I'll defend the walls. Picking up a saucepan of boiling water, he darted upstairs towards the window against which the ladder had been set.

As he came into the room in pitch darkness he saw dimly silhouetted against the night sky the black figure of a man. There was a sharp tap of the man's automatic on the glass and a hole was made. Smithy watched the man like the frightened but game little cocksparrow he was. It never entered his head to nip out of one of the unguarded windows and leg it for safety.

There had not been enough of a smash to indicate a complete break. Smithy held his pot of boiling water at the ready standing there in that pitch darkness shivering from head to foot, his lips twitching but doing their best to firm with fearful resolve.

Smithy's main chance now lay in his own expert knowledge of this first-story stuff. Undoubtedly, provided the man knew the rudiments of the job, he should now put his hand inside the catch. Then he would sling the window up as noiselessly as possible. All this was the straightforward business of breaking and entering. Smithy's cue was the slight noise of the sash moving up. He strained his ears, keeping his eyes glued on that dim outline at the top of the ladder against the velvety darkness of the night sky.

To his chagrin he heard a whispered

voice in some foreign language—French, he decided—and an answering voice from the ground. He comforted himself by deciding that these fellows could not be the Fighting French, but the Vichy type of animal. Small potatoes, he made up his mind, and felt more confident.

The catch went back with a sharp click, and Smithy heard the sash move upwards. He edged closer on tip-toe, realising that a saucepan was an awkward sort of thing to use if he wanted the water to hit the target. From scarcely more than one yard away, so close he could hear the man's breathing, the game little fellow measured his aim and shot the boiling water full in the face and body of the man on the ladder.

There was a bloodcurdling yell of such piercing pain that it must have been heard a couple of miles away. After that there was a sickening thud as a falling body hit the ground; after that moans of utter anguish. Smithy stood in the dark room shivering.

"Blimy, now I've gorn and done it!" he muttered, thinking of that yell of pain and the numbers of sentries dotted about the countryside. Police, soldiers, or marauders, they were all the same to Smithy with that man in the cellar.

He took the precaution of pushing the ladder away and had the satisfaction of hearing it splinter and break against some man below. Again there was a screech of pain, and Smithy decided once more that these were no-account Frenchmen, not the valiant type. Feeling more like himself, he again thought of one of his favourite yarns.

"If I only had a barrel of bubbling pitch, blimy if I only had!" Almost cockily he stuck his head out of the window. "That'll teach you guys not to come breaking into a gentleman's residence!" Some residence, he thought. A vagrant light caught the blued steel of an automatic, and Smithy ducked like nobody's business.

A bullet sang viciously into the room and smacked into the plaster. He heard the cough of a silencer. So they were prepared to shoot. He darted out of the room, locking the door behind him, and raced down to the kitchen.

"A blinking siege, that's what it is," he muttered, and glanced at the clock.

The sort of reinforcements he required could not arrive for some time yet. He crouched before the fire and took up his thriller in the care-free manner which he knew would mark Punch in such an extremity. But he could not read. His ears were keened to the slightest sound.

There were muffled voices coming from the yard. Three or four men he heard now. They were speaking in English, which should have given Smithy pause for thought. He could not know that he was about to be caught by one of the oldest games in the world.

"We'll have to get Bazon to a doctor," came one voice; "he's burned badly and some bones are broken."

"And do it quickly," said another man, "the sentries may have heard those screams."

Cutting into this talk came a merciless voice which sent a cold shiver all down Smithy's back. "Leave him; it was his own fault. Come! All of you!"

Smithy, listening intently, cheered that idea inwardly. He was warm with a sense of complete victory. There seemed to be some hesitation and a few grumbles, and again that sharp voice:

"Quick, you fools!"

There was a shuffle of receding footsteps as the men moved over the cobbled yard. Then Smithy heard a motor-car start and move away. He relaxed.

"And that, Sir Roderick, is victory!" he chuckled, addressing his hero of many a doughty fight in the Middle Ages. "If only I'd had that there boiling pitch I'd have made it a blinking

roust, straight I would." He was feeling perky.

But he could not take up his thriller again and get into the story. The poor devil the brutes had left outside the door was moaning pathetically. Smithy's feeble conscience was turning slowly over. What would Punch do? Probably the poor devil had blisters on his face as big as his fist, and all his ribs broken. He knew what Punch would do. He would be generous to a fallen enemy. Sir Roderick, too, would bring the man in and pour oil on his burns even if he had to hang him from the battlements afterwards.

Outside the house, except for those pitiful moans, the silence was as of the grave. The sentries did not appear to have been disturbed by the blood-curdling yell when Smithy threw the boiling water. The boy put his hand to the bolt, hesitated, then made up his mind to give rein to the human instincts which possessed him at the moment. If he had read his thriller more carefully he would have recognised that he was dealing with a wily and unscrupulous enemy. As Smithy opened the door he needed Sir Roderick, armed cap-a-pie, all his men-at-arms, and a battle-axe. Immediately the door was opened a press of men bore down on him and flung him back in the room. The "poor fellow" to whom he had intended to give succour got up from the ground, badly blistered and in pain, to be sure, but apparently with no bones broken. Smithy was a painfully disillusioned boy.

Swarming into the kitchen on top of the fallen Smithy came four men jabbering in French. One of them was in a wheel chair which he propelled with hand rims. Smithy had never seen such a handsome man in all his life. But there was nothing handsome about the man's actions. He it was who spoke with that cold, incisive voice which sent cold shivers down the boy's back.

"Where is Bennett?"

Smithy, lying with his head against the skirting board where he had brought up heavily, rubbed his head and replied with the perky courage of a true Cockney

"Wouldn't yer like to know, fat-head?"

The cripple merely extended his hand in an imperious gesture, which under less dangerous circumstances would have made Smithy laugh, and a languid Frenchman strolled over to the lad and snapped his fingers as if he were ordering an obsequious waiter to his table. The youngster was on his feet in a flash, like a terrier fighting from the drop of the hat. He licked in with bewildering speed. Two well-aimed kicks from his iron-shod boots cracked both the man's shins; his teeth sank with excruciating pain into the effeminate hand, and then his bony fists completed the job by presenting the Frenchman with two black eyes.

Out again with the same bewildering speed the young hellion sought what shelter he could find on the far side of the kitchen table. As an example of the high art of rough-and-tumble fighting, it was the swiftest and most vicious piece of action these worthless men had ever seen.

Smithy kept his eyes glued on the handsome cripple, the man he really feared, and watched him with dismay as he saw the Satanic glee on the man's face. As Smithy took refuge behind the table the twisted laugh went from the man's face like a light turned off at the switch. The handsome face twisted with annoyance.

With unbelievable dexterity the cripple shot his chair across the room, plucking the table out of his path as if it had been a piece of matchboard, and cornered the now frightened boy. The massive arms shot out and picked the boy off the floor with no apparent effort. - Squirming and kicking, but accomplishing nothing, Smithy met those terrible eyes and cracked.

"Don't—please, don't!"

What it was Smithy was afraid of he did not know, but if ever he had looked into the eyes of a savage beast he was doing it now. More frightening still was the terrible strength of those arms and fingers which held him at armslength with ease.

"Search the house and cellars for Ladoux!"

The men went to do his bidding, and Count Brille—for it was he—turned his cruel eyes on the captive boy like a filthy spider contemplating a fly hopelessly caught in his web. Then, almost absent-mindedly, as if he could not make up his mind, he flung the lad heavily into the corner of the room.

From below stairs came the ring of the iron bar as Ladoux was released. He appeared in the room a moment later, and tossed a brief "Thank you!" to Brille which was entirely lacking in thanks.

Smithy, wondering what he would say to Punch for making such a mess of things, was marvellously unhurt except for a few bruises, and was doing his best to make himself as small as possible. With dreadful fascination he kept his eyes glued on the little monster in the wheel chair. Brille was waving his men and Ladoux out of the door, as if his mission was finished. He shot his chair in the same direction, and Smithy breathed freely. But he did not yet know the type of man with whom he was dealing.

He was in the hands of a pastmaster in the art of cruelty, a man who used the dreadful weapon of suspense. At the door the chair turned right round in a swift, dexterous movement, and the boy met that baleful gaze again. Brille beckoned to one of his followers.

"Kick that boy's teeth into his mouth!" he ordered, in an even voice. "I shall watch," he added, grinning with evil amusement. Immediately arresting his minion with a move of his hand, he changed his mind. "No

—no, on second thoughts, he is rather too fond of hot water. I think we can improve on that. Lift the top of that stove and put his head in the coals!"

"No, no!"

Smithy, beside himself with fright, screaming, started racing round the room like a mouse darting away from a cruel cat with no real hope of survival. Brille sat in his chair by the door rocking with laughter, shrieks of almost maniac glee as the lad dodged frantically in wild terror, his eyes starting from his head. Table, chairs, everything, were scattered in the confusion, the boy finally picking up the coal-scuttle and throwing the contents full in the face of the laughing monstrosity by the door.

A second later he wished he had held his hand. There was a sudden silence in the room, the men looking at Count Brille as if some enormity had been committed, and wondering just what terrible vengeance he would take.

The cripple took out a beautiful white handkerchief and wiped his beautiful face like the veriest woman anxious about her make-up. Finally, he took a small mirror from his pocket and examined himself carefully. There were two bad cuts on his cheek from which the blood was bubbling. He asked an anxious question of one of his friends, speaking French, and got what appeared to be some reassurance.

He was calm now—terribly calm. He manoeuvred his chair towards Smithy who screamed again, but there was no evading the crippled fiend. He blocked every move the boy made until, with a cry of utter fright, he was again imprisoned in those terrible hands. Brille, his face set and hard, first drew the boy's face towards his and calmly spat at him.

Smithy could think of nothing but that roaring fire.

"You aren't going to do it, sir, please?" he pleaded.

As well might he have addressed his plea to a stone.

"Right into the middle of that fire, my lad!"

"Please! Oh, please, sir, please!"

"Open the fire!" ordered the count.

They took off the top of the range, and Smithy saw the red-hot coals. His body was wet with perspiration. Great sobs were shaking his skinny frame.

"You—you wait till Punch Bennett gets 'ere! 'E—e'll kill the blinking lot of yer—and think nothink of it, he won't! You beasts! You dirty swine!"

Holding the boy the count could not propel himself towards the fire.

"Francois," he ordered with icy politeness, "move my chair near the fire."

"Oui, Raoul—but, certainly." The pervers, Francois Schneider, was only too willing. He moved the chair towards the fire. The others, with the exception of Ladoux, who thought this was simply a joke to frighten the lad, were watching the performance with gleaming, lustful eyes.

"One little moment," murmured Brille. Conscious of the terrific strength in his arms he tossed the boy to the ceiling, twisting him as he fell so that the head was now turned towards the fire.

"Bravo, Raoul!" cried Francois Schneider.

The heat from the fire now in his face, Smithy kicked and squirmed like an eel. But no movement could free him from that merciless grip.

"Punch'll kill you for it!" screamed the boy.

The boy's head was slowly and fiendishly brought nearer the fire.

Lieutenant Ladoux, now realising that the cruel threat was about to be consummated by the foul beast in the wheel-chair, started forward and stood before the tormentor, white-faced and livid with wholesome anger.

"Put the boy down, Brille, this has gone far enough!"

Count Brille turned his head in a studied movement as if he only needed a quizzing glass to complete his affectation of annoyed hauteur.

"Ha, my friend, Lieutenant Rene Ladoux of the Fighting French!" He mouthed the last two words with writhing scorn. Deliberately he drew the boy's form back and then smashed his iron-shod boots into the French officer's face with fiendish force. "You are impertinent, Ladoux!" he hissed.

The only gentleman in the room, excepting poor Ladoux, was Smithy, who sang out: "Sorry, Ladoux!"

The Fighting Frenchman, a small man who was hopelessly outmatched by the group in the room apart from Brille, stood his ground like a gallant gentleman. White in the face, he mopped the blood from his mouth with his handkerchief and cursed Count Brille in French with a fearful fluency. He must have covered the complete catalogue of offence, for even the marble face of the crippled count winced under the lashing scorn.

In the midst of this fierce and horrible cursing nobody heard a small car drive up to the garage. There was a dead silence in the room as Ladoux finished his denunciation, all eyes turned on the count to learn what punishment the man was to receive.

The silence was broken by a powerful baritone voice lustily singing a rollicking marching song of the British Army:

"Has anyone seen the sergeant?"

Oh, I know where he is——"

"Punch!" cried Smithy as if all the angels of heaven were arriving, vast armies of them, to pluck him from these denizens of hell. He screamed at the top of his piping voice: "Look out, boss!"

"Okay, Smithy!" came the cheery voice from the yard, and the French-

men looked from one to the other in shaking agitation.

Punch came forward without the slightest hesitation and stood in the doorway, his large grin giving place to a frown as he saw Brille fling Smithy heavily into the corner and whip out an automatic. He stiffened like a great mastiff.

"Are you hurt, boy?"

"Not so you'd notice, boss," Smithy replied breathlessly. "They were going to stick my blinking 'ead in the fire. 'Im!" and he pointed at Brille. Pistol or no pistol Smith had a sublime faith in Punch's ability to come out on top of this bunch of misfits.

"Count Brille, I suppose?" Punch asked, looking frostily at the man with the automatic.

"Yes."

"You know, Brille," Punch drawled, "I don't like the idea of roasting my friend, Smithy. In fact, I'm quite put out."

Ladoux, in spite of his hurts, smiled.

Brille, quite unable to size up the big man in the doorway, raised his pistol. "Come here, Bennett!" he hissed.

Punch nodded and his grin made its appearance again.

"By Jove, yes! I never argue with the bloke who holds the pistol. Positively!" He took all of three steps forward.

"Rat!" hissed Ladoux, with a sudden reversion of feeling at the easy capitulation of a man who looked like a fighter.

"I say, you know," remonstrated Punch, "the thing might go off and kill me. Auntie wouldn't like that at all."

"Yes—rat!" cried Brille. He spoke sharply to Francois Schneider. "Tie the big clod up!"

Punch raised his arms.

"Really, no need at all, I'm perfectly harmless."

Schneider, a smirk on his face but inwardly fearful of this big man, came

timidly forward with a length of cord in his hands. By some manner or means the Frenchman clumsily got between Punch and the pistol.

"Wrists?" suggested Punch and held his arms out towards the Frenchman.

To the amazement of Smithy the man started to twist the cord round Punch's wrist, but he never wavered in his certainty about his boss. From Punch's point of view there had been more truth than fiction in his statement that he never argued with a pistol pointed straight at his heart. The things had a habit of going off even in the hand of a fool. The moment he had hypnotised Brille into thinking he was easy game, the pot was his.

As Brille lowered the pistol Punch swung into action. Using Schneider as a shield he hurled the mincing Frenchman clean at Brille. Nor did he finish there. Like a flash of lightning he was on one knee, evading the loosely aimed shot, and had the foot-rest of Brille's chair firmly in his grip.

A savage yank and Brille was a heap of twisted pain on the floor and Punch was handing out haymakers right and left. Smithy, quick as a terrier, grabbed the pistol. About ten seconds flat decided the business.

Punch took the pistol, righted the kitchen table, and looked round with an amused grin.

Smithy, his face still white and strained after his hellish experience, stood looking at the crippled man with all the hate of a hurt boy streaming from his eyes.

"Boss, do you mind if I kick 'im in the blinking teeth?"

Punch looked at the boy and seemed to understand.

"Like that, eh?" He looked across at Ladoux. "What do you think, old man?"

"For me," cried Ladoux, "I should like to cut his heart out."

Punch nodded. He knew something

about this Count Brille and his gang of perverts. Something very horrible must have happened to make Smithy feel that way. He nodded juridically. "I think—er—one kick, Smithy. Make it a good one." It was not like Punch, but cruelty to a boy was one of the few things which made him see red.

CHAPTER 7.

An Interim Settlement.

THE hour was late. Punch Bennett, Lieutenant Ladoux and Smithy were seated at the kitchen table taking care of some bread and cheese—a rather goodly ration of the latter which Punch had scrounged from sources unknown—and a fair grade of beer for the two older men. On the floor neatly arranged against the wall, were Count Brille, Count Bazon, Rene Mal-suite, Francois Schneider, and Maurice Villais, all duly pinioned and looking decidedly the worse for wear.

Bazon had received first aid treatment for his burns, but there was no beefsteak available from meagre rations for the livid bruises on the faces of the other three men. Brille was a mess, entirely out of action; but Smithy kept his face averted from those smouldering eyes. His recent fright was too fresh in memory.

There had been a titanic struggle between Punch and Brille, the outcome of which had brought a blasting discomfiture to the Frenchman which only death or some utter satisfaction would be able to wipe out. Punch, living in the present, did not realise that until it was too late.

When Punch came to pinion the men, Brille's massive fingers shot out like the darting paw of a tiger and fastened on the airman's wrists in a grip of iron. His broken lips with the blood still trickling from them bared the gums in hideous satisfaction. Punch, suddenly realising that here

was something which had to be settled once and for all, accepted the challenge. Smithy rushed forward to put in some neat footwork but was almost curtly warned off the course. For a full five minutes the two men pitted their strength the one against the other.

Ladoux and the boy watched with fascinated eyes as Punch slowly exerted his strength against the abnormality of Brille's great power. They could almost see the strength pouring from those straining chests into the arms, muscles sinuous and firm as steel bands, maintaining a rigidity like two pieces of welded steel. Not a movement could be observed. The faces of the men were as set as carved granite, veins slowly swelling and standing out like whipcord.

Perspiration rolled down the faces of the two men, trickled down their necks and joined the beaded sweat of exertion welling up from every pore in their bodies. The watchers almost cried for some movement before overstrained muscles slackened and broke.

Brille was the first to try strategy, but they could see it was a strategy born of a certainty smashing into his warped brain with ghastly discomfiture that he had at last met his match. He snarled like an animal. The muscles of his mighty arms thickened and rippled like whipping steel as he sought by sudden jerks to gain an advantage. But there was no moving the arms vised in his grasp. Grim and tense Punch looked down at this animal-like monstrosity sweating and grunting beneath him. Slowly, under that intense and confident gaze, the savage fire receded from the Frenchman's eyes.

Ladoux and Smithy noted with a sharp hiss of satisfaction the bleak certainty of those blazing eyes glazing and cowering now in animal fear. Almost he seemed to cower like a beaten beast of the jungle. All his vaunted strength which he could pit against a young lad

in cruel savagery slipped away from him like steel melting in a crucible.

And now Punch pursued his advantage to the point of victory. With a grunt he called on his last reserve of strength. His mighty chest heaved under a prodigious exertion of his muscles, and he broke the hold the man beast had on his wrists. He sucked the breath into his lungs and pounced swiftly on the man's wrists, anchoring there like grappling hooks. There was still a tremendous resistance but the Frenchman's wrists came slowly together, inch by inch, as if pressed by a pair of mighty pincers. As they met Punch nodded to Smithy, and the lad tied them with a length of stout cord.

Punch pulled the pinioned hands down, and the ends of the cord were passed between the man's legs, up the back, and round his neck. Punch hauled the man alongside the others and looked grimly down at him.

"Now, my beauty, get out of that and you'll wring your dirty neck!"

The other four Frenchmen had watched the proceedings with open-mouthed astonishment, their tell-tale faces running through the gamut of a man's emotions, from a grim certainty that their champion would not be bested to a shocked dismay that he had met more than his match. Judging from their faces as Brille was lugged ignominiously across the room and lodged against the wall the count had lost a great deal more than a combat with Punch Bennett.

All of them now expected torture and probably death, their minds being seated in cruelty. Instead, they were amazed to see Punch, as soon as he had recovered his normal comfort of body, concern himself with bread and cheese and a bottle of beer. They dismally decided that this was the high art of suspense.

Punch made handsome amends to Lieutenant Ladoux. He explained his

particular mission and his necessity for visiting London before he could ask the French aviator the few questions he had in mind.

"It is all right, monsieur, I received no hurt except"—Ladoux looked malevolently at the frothing brute against the wall and wryly passed a handkerchief over his lip—"What is it you wish to know?"

"What happened to the diamonds?"

"But, monsieur, I knew nothing of the diamonds until that excrement"—he nodded at Brille—"complained to me in the hotel at Salisbury that a package of diamonds was missing. I thought the little matter was to bring this so fearful man and his servant to the safety of England."

"I see," Punch said thoughtfully. It was reasonably obvious, looking at Ladoux, that the man was telling the truth. "And this other trash?" Punch jerked a thumb at the men propped against the wall.

Ladoux answered at once. "They were all in France when I left, they had some plan to get to England in a fishing boat, these men and Monsieur Chateaufort."

"How about the execrable Bartot?"

"That animal?" Ladoux shook his head. "He was in Paris when I left for England. An Army aeroplane was waiting to take him as soon as he had concluded his peculiar affairs." The man's voice firmed and became edged with loathing. "Monsieur Bennett, there are some Frenchmen who have sworn that Bartot shall come to the guillotine when our poor France has been freed from the Boche."

As far as Punch was concerned they could have Bartot hung, drawn, and quartered.

"You have my blessing, old son. How about you? Weren't you taking a bit of a chance bringing this lump of obscenity to England?"

Ladoux treated the matter as a joke.

"Just the little venture, monsieur!

We had nothing—no money. We—well, we were all doing it; we had the necessary permission to fly our ships to England. There are Frenchmen who are Frenchmen," Ladoux stated simply. "I did not know I was bringing a monster to England, and I did not know that Bartot was— Well, you understand, monsieur, what Bartot is?"

"I've got more than a rough idea," nodded Punch. "Where was Madame la Marquise Langtac in all this mess?"

Again Ladoux could not answer.

"In England presumably, monsieur; I have not the knowledge exact."

And that was that. Punch, not as experienced as Sexton Blake, decided to deal in face values. He mentally gave the aviator a clean bill of health. But his mind was not the clear-thinking apparatus Blake possessed. Punch was too prone to ram a theory into his head and hang on to it, matching up every bit of evidence with his own preconceived ideas.

Thus, Ladoux merely confirmed the settled conviction which was in the airman's mind. To him the plot centred round a scheme this pervert had evolved to force the lovely Suzanne into a hateful marriage. Punch never gave a thought to Sexton Blake's dislike of the woman and her easy nonchalance in affiancing herself to the disgusting Bartot to resolve her immediate difficulties. To Punch, Suzanne was all silk, and a yard wide; and he went thundering down the right of way of that notion.

He took as his starting-point an undemonstrated fact: that Brille had the diamonds when he left Paris. He had boarded his aeroplane at the Paris aerodrome, with the diamonds, and come to England. At once, taking the package of diamonds, he had gone to an hotel in Salisbury with his servant, Jules. There, from a room with locked doors and windows, he wanted Blake to believe that the package of diamonds had been stolen. That he hanged for

a tale. It was nice stuff for a tricky mystery writer, but Punch preferred the obvious. He had picked up a few jewels himself in his time, but not out of locked rooms.

The approved method was to barge in, bag the swag, and leg it. Never at any time had he managed to leave a setting of locked doors and windows. Bosh, fiddlesticks, and tommy-rot! Brille had the package of stones in the hotel, the door and windows were locked, and the only people there present were Brille and Jules; ergo, Brille had the stones, unless he was under the thumb of this man Jules; and Suzanne was firmly of the opinion that Brille was very much the master and Jules the servant. Now that he had the man in his power, Punch decided it was sheer common sense to make him kick in with some part of the swag. He got out of his chair and walked over to the count, looking down at him with a grim smile dripping with disgust.

"Well, my noble squirt, the subject is diamonds. Orate!"

Brille could think of nothing but savage torture for a man in his hopeless position, and he was well aware that one twist of his maimed leg was more than the human frame could stand. His eyes might flash undying hate, but his broken lips carried the cowardly words of compromise.

"Let me go, and I'll pay!"

The other heroes made it unanimous.

"And I, too! And I, too!"

Punch laughed.

"Hanged if you aren't the most amiable bunch of squirts I have ever seen in one place!"

They would pay! Punch was suddenly filled with an honest disgust to think that men such as these could exist in a world of war. Pay? Of course they would pay! First he must free himself of the shackles of that arrangement with Suzanne and the other arrangement with Sexton Blake.

He pursed his lips. Then he might do something about it.

"This is what you call settling out of court. Rum go, eh, Smithy?"

"Not 'arf, boss!" Smithy had quite recovered from his fright.

"Got your cheque-books?" Punch asked the exhibits on the floor.

They all nodded eagerly.

This was getting really good. Punch, never more irrepressible and amused than in a position such as this, assumed an air of gravity which mocked the grin trembling on his lips. Many a time he had been on the receiving end of a homily from a solicitor, but never on the other side.

"Pay attention, my hearties, because this is going to hurt!"

The valiant Francois squirmed in sudden alarm.

"But we pay you not to hurt us!"

"Quiet, pug-nose! Lieutenant Ladoux, in this vexing matter of Ladoux versus the drippings on the floor, let us proceed to assess the damages!"

Ladoux smiled happily.

"In the matter of your teeth?" asked Punch gravely.

"None broken!"

"Tut-tut, intent, old warrior, the law frowns on intent! How about the rosy lips?"

"They will heal."

Punch considered the matter.

"You will settle for one thousand pounds for intent to do bodily harm."

There was a groan from the floor, but Ladoux continued to smile happily.

"That disposes of your case, Lieutenant Ladoux," Punch said serenely, and wrote on a piece of paper. "Now, Squirts"—he addressed the floor—"we come to the case of Smithy. He isn't much to look at, but a noble spirit. I'm afraid Smithy comes high, my braves. We'll award you one thousand pounds, Smithy, to buy marbles, kites, and things."

Smithy's eyes nearly popped out of his head.

"A thousand quid! Blimy, boss!" His eyes receded into his head as he contemplated a roseate future filled with unbelievable possessions.

"Exactly," nodded Punch juridically. "Cut their ropes, my lad!"

"All of 'em?"

Punch shook his head.

"No, Smithy; just the squirts. The bloke with the busted face is a bad case requiring considerable consideration!"

The four men immediately produced their cheque-books and each wrote a cheque for five hundred pounds. Punch placed them carefully in his pocket-book, and asked Ladoux and Smithy to conduct the crestfallen men to the makeshift prison in the cellars.

"But, monsieur, we have paid!" cried one of them.

"On your way," ordered Punch. "What sort of a blasted idiot do you think I am? A cheque is a cheque, but cash is a horse of a very different colour!"

Ladoux went away with the prisoners, any contemplated duplicity having been nipped in the bud. Punch looked down at Brille, his face as cold as ice. A grunting heave and the man was in his wheel chair.

"Cheque-book?" growled Punch.

The discomfited count nodded sullenly.

"Make it out for one hundred and ten thousand pounds! Fast! I don't argue with rats!"

Brille winced at the enormous demand as if he had just suffered an excruciating torment in his maimed leg.

"But—but I do not have that sum on my account! You are extortionate!"

"Extortionate?" cried Punch. "Me? Of all the blasted crust! You, with two million in stolen diamonds, and you call me extortionate! You'd better get that fungus of a brain of yours working fast. I want a hundred thousand for Suzanne, and there is the matter of my fee!"

"But the diamonds were stolen from me!"

"Liar! Do you think I'm a mug?" "And if I don't provide this black-mail?" the count asked sullenly.

Punch put his face down close to Brille.

"Ladoux is ready to cut your rotten heart out. I'll watch, and then I'll give Smithy the pieces. Suit yourself." He strolled away and knocked the cap off a bottle of beer, not bothering to use the tankard as he drank.

Brille, judging this big man by his own standards, capitulated, but he had to write a letter to his banker requesting that certain securities be sold to provide the money. Punch took the cheque and placed it with the others in his pocket.

Roping the man's hands again, he wheeled him downstairs somewhat bumpily.

"As soon as I have the money you will be freed," he advised the sorry group, and closed the door, placing the iron bar in position. It was none too soon. A hiss of warning from Smithy told him that some soldiers were coming into the yard.

"O.K., Smithy, coming!" Punch gathered an armful of bottled beer and came upstairs, deposited it on the table, and raced down again. He opened the judas in the prison door and cautioned the men inside. "There are some soldiers coming. One bleat out of you rats and I'll hand the lot of you over to the police for breaking and entering!"

This might be serious. The military evidently were making a belated inquiry as to the cause of the row at the farmhouse. Punch pursed his lips. In fact, with all that potential wealth in his pocket, it might be more than serious. There was a sharp rap on the kitchen door, and Punch opened it, his face wreathed in a cheery grin.

A major of infantry was outside. Punch smilingly asked him to come in.

"Just in time, major! A spot of beer?"

"Official business," advised the major, not very enthusiastically.

"Moisten it, my lad, moisten it!" Punch opened some bottles and rinsed out the tankards. Somehow or other, the major found himself with a bottle in one hand and a tankard in the other, with a big, cheery fellow standing over him. There was nothing to do but bring his hands together. Punch proceeded to do the honours. "This is Lieutenant Rene Lédoux of the Fighting French, and a first-class guy."

The officer nodded affably and said his name was Prentice. He noted the hurt to "the first-class guy's" mouth.

"And I'm Bennett—er—a test pilot of the hush-hush aeroplane works and all that sort of thing."

"Quite! I just came to ask——"

"And this is Smithy," broke in Punch. "Not much to look at, but a heart of gold, if you follow me!"

"How do, Smithy? Er—Mr. Bennett, they sent me along to——"

"Take a load off your feet," suggested Punch, pulling up a chair. "Beer is a bit brackish, eh—what? War-time, you know, and all that sort of thing. They should make brewing a key industry in war-time. Morale of the troops, you know."

"Er—yes!" The major smiled. "May I see your papers?"

"Papers? By Jove, yes, of course! Rene, old warrior, your papers!"

The papers were immediately forthcoming, and were indisputably in order. A test pilot, a ground force officer attached to the R.A.F., all duly on leave, Punch's lay-off being euphemistically stated on his papers because the squadron leader was a pal, and a lad under age for military service.

"Thanks! Now"—and Major Prentice set his tankard firmly down—"I have been sent along to——"

"By Jove! I get it now!" exclaimed Punch. "Not a social call at all. You

don't mean that spot of bother we had to-night?"

"Then there was——"

Punch lowered his big form into a chair and looked seriously at the officer. "I can see you are a chap of discretion."

"I—— Well, if you put it that way."

"I do," said Punch firmly. "Bit hush-hush this farmhouse, if you get me. I'm working on a gadget—a—well, can't exactly explain the doings—secrecy and all that sort of tosh. And, would you believe me?" His eyes sparkled with incredulity. "Actually, in a rundown place like this we had burglars to-night!"

"No?"

"Positively, old chap. Distressing, eh—what? And here was poor little Smithy holding the fort, as it were!"

"You mean they got right in? I take it there were more than one?"

"A gang," Punch told him.

"Was that you screaming?" Prentice asked Smithy.

"No. I chucked a saucepan of boiling water at the bloke on the ladder!" replied Smithy proudly.

"Good lord! Plucky no end!"

"And then I came along," broke in Punch hastily, taking a lot of shaky fences in his stride. "I threw my weight about a bit, as it were, and kicked 'em out!"

"Kicked them out?" The major was seriously perturbed. "That wasn't quite wise, or was it?"

Punch serenely brought the matter to a satisfactory head.

"Can't have policemen mucking about here," he stated flatly. "These magistrates aren't miracles of discretion like us fellows. They ask lots of sticky questions, and then where would we be with this secret gadget? Nowhere, you see that?"

"Oh, I see! Quick thinking, Mr. Bennett, if I may say so. I hoped you tanned their behinds."

Punch rose.

"Major, I don't think I neglected anything," he stated; "in fact, I'm sure I haven't. Another spot of beer? No? Well, any time." And he carefully shepherded his visitor to the door. "If you should see any shady characters—er—lurking—I believe that is the right word, eh—what?—just push 'em around a bit!"

"I'll attend to it," and Major Prentice made his exit well pleased to have made such an affable acquaintanceship. "Good-night!"

"Good-night!" and Punch closed the door. "Phew!" he said to the others. "One blooming slip and a ruddy fortune would have been in the soup."

"Are you really going to give me that thousand quid, boss?" asked Smithy plaintively.

"In bonds, young 'un; bonds for the defence of this realm, this England, this 'precious stone set in the silver sea.' Struth, what a night! Let's go to bed; to-morrow will be another day covered all over with banknotes of large and satisfying denominations. Good-night, m'lads!"

CHAPTER 8.

Suzanne Laughs.

THERE was a certain uplifting of eyebrows when Punch presented his enormous cheque at Count Brille's bank, together with the letter of instruction, and asked for cash. Just what these bank fellows were there for except to provide cash in exchange for cheques was outside Punch's orbit of reasonable understanding. He was positive there could be no slip, as Brille, being in durance vile until the transaction was completed, could not possibly have countermanded his instructions.

A gentleman wearing a white moustache and a look of aching curiosity to see this peculiar man who was asking for over one hundred thousand pounds in cash approached Punch.

"You want to take this in cash—er—Mr. Bennett?" He did not tell Punch that a messenger was racing to the Bank of England to get this almost unprecedented amount in notes, there being barely fifty thousand pounds in the vaults for the ordinary transaction of business.

"Yes, cash."

"Ahem—cash." A brow which seemed absolutely corrugated with wrinkles squeezed a few more into position. "You have some—er—papers—er—you appreciate this is a rather large amount—ahem!—a matter of identification?"

Punch cheerfully advised the worried man that he was simply covered over with papers and produced a sheaf of them.

"Ration cards do? Or a pilot's certificate? Or, by Jove, here's a nice parchmenty sort of thing, the Air Ministry's gift to test pilots!"

The bank frostily ignored the frippery and took the Air Ministry's identification card.

"Thank you."

He went away to a room down the banking hall and firmly closed the door. Punch followed him into the room, cheerfully helpful.

"If you are going to telephone the Ministry, ask for 'Brownie' Hardcastle, pal of mine. Punch Bennett is the name."

"Are you referring to Air Vice-Marshal Hardcastle?"

Punch nodded cheerfully and wondered what there was about him which could make this banker doubt him.

The banker did things with his telephone, and just what Brownie Hardcastle might have said about Punch was nipped in the bud by the dignified and stilted wording of the man's request. He did say, however, that if Punch had fallen heir to a fortune the banker might jog his memory about a "pony" he had invested in some gadget the airman was working on.

"Ah, yes, to be sure," and the banker

hung up his telephone. "The marshal said—er—there is a matter of—er—a pony——"

"Why, the darned old skinflint! Take it out of the doings and send it by special messenger."

"But—he said a pony?"

Punch told him.

"In the language of the proletariat that is twenty-five quid."

"Good lord, yes; should have remembered! A racing term—eh, what?"

Punch thought, with careful tuition, he might make a regular guy out of the banker. He got his money in notes of large denominations, bought a bond for Smithy's old age, and left the pony to be sent to Brownie Hardcastle by special messenger. Brownie stood the shock quite nicely.

Back at the farmhouse Punch gave Ladoux his thousand pounds, and at once had on his hands the most exuberant Frenchman in the United Kingdom. Smithy took his bond dubiously and was far more interested in the five-pound-note Punch gave him to spend. That was what the boy called real spending money. His vision of motor cars, yachts, and a castle or two in the country, faded.

Punch was sorely tempted to confiscate Brille's motor-car, which was a much better job than his own, but decided against a traceable theft. He loaded all the Frenchmen into the car, freeing one of them to drive. They could worry themselves out of their cords on the way home.

That afternoon Punch presented himself at the Hotel Splendide and was conducted at once to Suzanne's suite. He had another call to make, which was at Baker Street, but he preferred to commence the afternoon pleasantly.

Madame la Marquise extended an aristocratic hand, presumably for Punch to kiss, but his ideas travelled past her hand and he took care of her lips, to which proceeding she offered no objection. Cold as charity, and that's

mighty chilly, thought Punch, and opened his satchel.

"One hundred thousand of the best, wasn't it, Suzanne?" He chuckled and started counting out the money. He was rather well pleased with himself that he had prevailed over his loose ideas of keeping all the money. "Less ten thousand for my fee," he added happily, and placed that back in the satchel to keep company with the additional ten thousand he had filched from De Brille.

Engaged in such a marvellous occupation and reflecting that his sole means a few hours before had been seven shillings and tenpence-halfpenny, he quite failed to observe the blank astonishment on the Frenchwoman's face. She was simply staring from the money to Punch's face in the most incredulous manner.

"But—but I don't understand!"

"Suzanne, don't trifle with serious matters," chuckled Punch. "Money is the only thing I understand; it has a crisp and wealthy feeling which brings tears to my eyes."

Suzanne's smooth brow wrinkled like the banker's had done. Her voice took on a shrill note.

"But, my friend—the diamonds? You cannot have obtained the diamonds!"

"And now, if you will sign the receipt?" asked Punch, ignoring this question as so much woman-talk.

Rapidly, almost with venom in her mind, she signed the receipt and Punch tucked it away in his pocket.

"Happy?" he asked, as he pushed the heap of money across the table. His eyes followed it with a sigh. Honesty was a curious policy.

"Happy—am I happy? Monsieur Punch, it is to me of all things the most incomprehensible."

"Just like watching a conjurer pull a rabbit out of a hat?" suggested Punch. He assumed the large air. "Oh, well, we detectives, we all have our methods."

"Stop!" she cried, and stamped her foot on the carpeted floor. "You treat me like the so little girl, you big ox!"

"Temper! Temper! That's not the way to treat a man who has just brought you a bunch of money like that. Have a heart, Suzanne."

"Tell me," she said earnestly, calming down somewhat, "exactly where did you get all that money for me?"

Punch laughingly set the demand aside by asking Suzanne to have dinner with him that night. He had no particular desire to take the bloom off his rose by informing her that he had done no smart detective work, but had bludgeoned the money out of Brille by force majeure. Punch had his conceits, one of which was a fixed impression that he could reach to the heart of a problem as quickly as Sexton Blake.

Unexpectedly she drew back, taut and angry, the cat-claws showing sharply.

"I shall not be played with, Monsieur Punch! You are my paid servant—yes, no? Did you get the diamonds?"

"You have the money, why bother?"

Her teeth showed vexedly. For some curious reason she was anxious.

"You big buffoon! Imbecile!" She stamped her foot. "Beeg, stupid fool! Tell me, did you get the diamonds?"

Punch looked at the woman in amazed amusement.

"If you aren't a little hell fire! Pon my soul, Suzanne, if you and your tribe don't take the cake with a big raspberry on top. No, sweetheart, I did not get the diamonds."

She was not quite satisfied.

"Then—this money?"

"Oh, well, if you want to know," said Punch, growing disinterested, "I got hold of this poisonous little hellion you call Count de Brille and made him see the light." He grinned. "A devil of a lot of light, just over a hundred thousand pounds' worth!"

"You—you—" Suzanne looked at the big man in blank amazement. In the back of her eyes was a note of relief

which Punch failed to notice. Unexpectedly she burst into laughter. "Count de Brille paid you the money when you remonstrated with him?"

At remote intervals there were occasions when Punch could get distinctly annoyed, and this looked like being one of them.

"Got it in one, Suzanne," he said somewhat shortly, "but I wouldn't call it remonstrating. We did have an entertaining evening, and the lad paid over the doings with tears in his eyes."

"Tears in his eyes! Oh, la, la—you are so droll, so very funny. The execrable De Brille paid you the money for me? You so stupid Monsieur Punch!"

Punch picked up his hat.

"If you ever get round to the point of your joke you might send me a post-card," he said curtly, and turned on his heel. He did not quite know whether he was being laughed at or with, and neither point of view interested him half as much as the twenty thousand snugly in his possession.

She darted towards him.

"But you are angry—Punch," and she certainly could put a lot of "come-hither" stuff into his name.

"Angry?" repeated Punch, and knew he was angry clean through. The sharp-faced little vixen with a crackling laugh like the sound-man's peas in a drum, he wondered what he had seen in her in the first place. "There's an old flower girl in the Circus who sells me roses when I'm in funds and gives them to me when I'm not. Compared with you, my cackling little pip-squeak, she's a lady. So-long, my poisonous little marquisel!"

"But, Punch, aren't you going to kees me—a beeg kees?"

"Struth!" thought Punch, disgusted. He grinned without much amusement. "Y'know, Suzanne, I'd like to put you across my knee and give you an old-fashioned spanking. It's been nasty knowing you and the muck you travel

with. If you get round to the joke, you might let me know."

"Ugh! Beeg brute! Imbecile!"

But Punch left her in the middle of her tirade. There was a screw loose somewhere in this business, and he did not have the foggiest notion what the trouble was. He went to his bank and nearly gave the cashier apoplexy by depositing nineteen thousand pounds in his account. Then, with no particular enthusiasm, he made his way to Baker Street. He rather thought he had done old Sexton in the eye again, but these things had to be faced.

CHAPTER 9.

The Bandit.

SEXTON BLAKE had been far from idle while Punch Bennett was punching his reckless way to what might turn out to be a Pyrrhic victory over Count de Brille and his unlovely companions. Already, like a benign octopus, he had spread his sensitive feelers over a wide field, sucking in a variety of information which he expected to build into a body of evidence on which he could take action with his usual precision. This exploration had confirmed a number of his original conjectures. He distrusted Madame la Marquise Langtac; he despised Jean Bartot, although he was willing to admit that the man was a clever and unscrupulous scoundrel equipped with considerable brain power; and he had a wholesome abhorrence of Count de Brille and his unlovely associates. Out of this bubbling cauldron of the devil's brew he hoped to separate the filth from the utter filth.

On one point, however, he had changed his mind, and that was in regard to the possible bona fides of the crippled count. This man seemed to be at the centre of a dog-eat-dog conspiracy which would probably reveal a most unsavoury mess. He was, there-

fore, amazed and sceptical when Punch Bennett breezed into his consulting-room to tell him that everything was all nicely tucked away and finished.

"Your astonish me, Punch!"

"Astonished myself, old sleuth!" remarked Punch, not at all happy about his relations with the great detective.

Blake was not the man to underestimate Punch, but it was really beyond his belief that the man, for all his flair for barging into tricky situations and coming out with his flag still flying, if somewhat tattered, had got to the bottom of this intricate bit of double-dealing.

He asked a direct question.

"What did you do with the diamonds?"

"The diamonds?" echoed Punch. Trust the old Baker Street wizard to go right to the core of the matter. "They are still loose as it were," he said weakly.

Blake sat down and charged his pipe, lighting it with great deliberation. He looked across at the cheerful freebooter and knew at once that Punch was not happy about this visit, but some strange code he possessed made it necessary. Whether Punch was worried about the methods he had employed to bring about some partial success or if he was worried about the loose arrangement Blake had made with him had yet to be determined.

"Then you have not recovered the diamonds and yet you have concluded the case?" Blake questioned. "I suppose it makes some sort of sense in your mind, Punch, but to me it is so much balderdash. As I understand things you were employed by Suzanne to make certain inquiries which would result in freeing her from her dependence on this wretched aristocrat. My commission is to recover the diamonds." He paused reflectively. "When you were here yesterday it appeared to me that the two inquiries

should parallel and we might work along together, with—er—certain reservations on my part."

The "certain reservations" were quite well known to Punch. The detective was not willing to associate himself with unlawful methods.

"A meaty oration," agreed Punch. He, too, charged his pipe and got it going. He wished this business were over. "Y'know," he grinned, "when I get into an orchard full of plums I usually have an urge to scrump the fruit."

"And also eat it," added Blake amusedly. There was no doubt that Punch had pulled off some colossal stunt. He looked like a cat who has swallowed a canary except for an apparent worry about this particular conversation. "Was the plum juicy?"

"It added up to one hundred and twelve thousand pounds."

"Phew!" whistled Tinker; "and crikey!"

"Banditry, highway robbery, or plain theft?" asked Blake.

"The legal wallahs would call it a settlement out of court."

"At the point of a gun?" Sexton Blake laughed.

Appreciating the mood Punch decided he might just as well get it all off his chest instead of letting this brainy man obtain the story piecemeal. He told Blake exactly what had happened the previous night without pulling any punches.

Surprisingly to Punch, Sexton Blake was not in the least annoyed. The man had simply run true to form. Brille and his companions had stuck their heads in the lion's lair and got hurt in the process. But the detective had to deal with first things first.

"There may be some nasty results from this, Punch."

"Hell!" cried Punch, "you aren't such an ass as to call twenty thousand of the best a nasty result."

"Not if it is legitimate."

The irrepressible Punch sighed.

"Now we get the brainy stuff, Hero," he said to Tinker. "Take back all the nice plums you stole and tell the bad man you're sorry. Personally, Blake, I am amazed at my restraint."

"Come, come, Punch, you don't think I am as simple as all that! You discussed certain plans with me yesterday." He smiled. "There is such a thing as clearing the decks for action, you know. May I suggest that the old school tie idea lingers—er—faintly with you, and you wanted to be free of Suzanne before you really got down to business?"

"Well, I'll be everlasting go to the dickens!" cried Punch, looking at the detective in blank amazement for once. "Dashed if you haven't missed your calling. You ought to get a velvet cloak and a crystal ball and go into the business. Wave the wand, old chap, and tell me if I shall get my paws on the diamonds."

Blake smiled well pleased.

"Then it is still more your intention now Suzanne is not your—er—client to go after the larger game?"

Punch was smilingly frank about it.

"Two millions in the hands of that poisonous swine makes me weep. It will be a charity to relieve him of them."

"You'll probably do your weeping in Dartmoor Prison," said Blake dryly. "Our tentative arrangement is at an end, of course."

"Alas," moaned Punch, knowing that was the exact reason for his call. He had his code.

Sexton Blake got to his feet and took a thoughtful turn or two up and down the room. He did not disguise from himself the thought that Punch was quite liable to bring off this coup, and he also could not disguise the unpleasant thought that it might become his painful duty to mulct him of his ill-gotten gains and hand him over to the authorities as a common thief. It

would also, in such an event, become his duty to return the diamonds to this nasty group of people. The law runs the same for all kinds even if Brille was barely keeping within the law. He told Punch exactly where he stood in the matter, a point of view which the big man had already examined and discarded with cheerful indifference.

"You are quite settled in your mind that Brille has the diamonds?" Blake asked pointedly.

"Ask yourself, old brain, look at that hundred thousand!"

"But that does not prove the diamonds were not stolen from him."

"Proof enough for me."

"But, man, don't you see?—Brille is an exceedingly wealthy man apart from these jewels. You had him in your power with a chance of sending him to prison for breaking and entering. He chose to pay what he may call a ransom. Scotland Yard may call it something else."

"I wish you wouldn't be so dashed dampening," grumbled Punch. "You get more like my old aunt every day. Charlie Peace might have pinched those diamonds out of a locked room, but not an ordinary bloke."

This was the merest surface reasoning and Sexton Blake threw a monkey wrench into the machinery at once.

"Has it struck you that the diamonds may have been stolen before Brille boarded that aeroplane in Paris, that he carried a dummy package with him to Salisbury?"

"You're spoofing!"

"I was never more in earnest in my life."

"But, hang it——" Punch was dumbfounded. Trilling in the back of his mind was the sound of Suzanne's laugh when he handed her the ninety thousand pounds, that unexplained laugh which had made him angry. Had the spritely little woman led him nicely down the garden path? But no! Brille might be a poisonous skunk, but he was

nobody's fool. Blake was having him on now. "How about when Brille opened the dummy package?"

But Sexton Blake had considered that theory thoroughly.

"I don't think you understand the abnormality of this man, Count de Brille."

"My hat! Don't I?"

"One minute, Punch! Don't let a hectic impression run away with your reason. If my hypothesis is correct, Brille is just the man who could open a dummy package and decide in his cruel and crafty mind to keep his own counsel; and incidentally take steps to repay the theft in some hideous manner. He could also, in line with that line of reasoning, go through the formality of engaging my services for no other reason than to lull the thief into a sense of false security as far as he was concerned. All these things are possible when you are dealing with a man of maniacal ingenuity such as this crippled little monstrosity."

It was Punch's turn to leap out of his chair and walk up and down the room in agitation.

"Got it!" he exclaimed.

"May I have your pearl of wisdom?" asked Blake, not without a touch of irony.

But the barbed arrow fell wide. Punch was still following the train of thought which Blake's previous remark had set in motion.

"Good lord, of course! Suzanne laughed at me when I brought her that money. She knows darned well where the diamonds are, because she is in on the steal."

"That is a possibility, but don't forget that Suzanne was in London before Brille left Paris."

"But, darn it, Blake, she's in with Brille on the job. Brille isn't any blooming philanthropist to keep her in clover if he doesn't hold the diamonds. Besides, why should he kick in with

that hundred thousand if it meant a dead loss to him?"

But Blake would have none of it.

"Does it change your theory to know that a parcel of diamonds, undoubtedly a part of these Paris diamonds, was offered on the London market while Brille and his men were attacking you at your farmhouse?"

"No-o."

"I think you had better put your thinking-cap on again," said Blake. "Here's another question for you: Why should Brille attack you and try to get hold of Ladoux when you were acting for Suzanne? That rather gives the lie to your supposition that Suzanne and Brille are in this thing together."

"Who offered the diamonds?" asked Punch.

Sexton Blake told him that the stones were offered through Jordan & Company, diamond merchants of high repute who must have been satisfied as to the vendor. The firm declined to furnish exact information.

"Jules for a tenner!" exclaimed Punch. "He's a slippery guy, you told me."

"An ex-convict!"

"Well, there you are! The thing fits. Jules is Brille's man."

Blake saw that he would be unable to persuade Punch that this was a far more intricate inquiry than he imagined. Punch was cheerfully sure that Brille was playing a shrewd game of some sort or other, and actually had the diamonds in his possession. He was anxious to have a second bout with the crippled count. Sexton Blake gave him a stern warning.

"Very good, then! Don't come whining to me if things go wrong. Remember, my duty is to recover these diamonds and return them to the legitimate owners. I shall go the limit. If I have to recover them from you that end will be within the four walls of a prison."

"A battle of giants," grinned Punch impudently, and took his leave. He had got out of that lot rather better than he had expected.

CHAPTER 10.

The Official Police.

ALMOST lightheartedly Sexton Blake had listened to Punch Bennett's story of the affray with Count de Brille, although he had seen fit to issue a stern warning before the airman left. But if he could have looked into Inspector Ed Miller's office at Scotland Yard while Punch was explaining matters, he would have received a clear demonstration as to the lengths which this crippled blackguard was prepared to go in pursuit of his vengeance.

Looking somewhat the worse for wear, Count de Brille had arrived at the headquarters of the Metropolitan Police Force and sent Jules into the building to arrange an interview. The count was subsequently introduced into the office of Sexton Blake's good friend, Inspector Ed Miller. That officer, seeing Brille for the first time in a vindictive mood, was singularly unimpressed by the man, the curl of his lips, the cruel light in his remarkable eyes, and the ardour with which he pursued his *bête noire*, Punch Bennett.

Brille told a story—revised version—of how he and his friends, called on Punch at his farmhouse on a matter of business and had been promptly set on by this big ruffian, cruelly treated, and made under extreme duress to pay a ransom of £112,000.

"Phew!" whistled Inspector Miller, who, knew his Punch. "Nothing modest about that!"

Miller, who was a shrewd and pains-taking officer, asked a lot of careful questions, but could not shake the story Brille had told him. The attack had been quite unprovoked. He received some embellishments. Punch, accord-

ing to Brille, had held him on the floor while a young ruffian named Smithy had kicked him.

At that astonishing declaration he sat up and took particular notice. He became sceptical of the whole thing at once. Obviously this unprepossessing Frenchman had been kicked or struck in the mouth, but his hurt was no more than a badly broken lip. Equally obviously, knowing the type of man Punch was, Miller could not quite see the man in the role of coward. There was more in this than met the eye, but whatever provocation there had been for that smash in the face, the thought that Punch had held this cripple while Smithy had done it was not worth considering.

"What was the nature of your business, count?"

"A private matter," Brille answered fairly pleasantly, and proceeded to cloud that part of the story with considerable cunning. "I can go as far as to say that it has to do with a cartel in which a number of us are interested." Quite obligingly he furnished the names of the members of this cartel. "Madame la Marquise, who has no knowledge of business whatever, is under a misapprehension as to the disposal of certain funds brought to England, and stupidly asked this ruffian to look after her interests. I went to his home"—and the lie came as smooth as treacle—"to acquaint him with the correct situation. I was treated in this manner."

Miller received the story with certain reservations, but he had to agree that some sections of the Frenchman's story bore the cachet of truth. This was further substantiated when Count Brille produced the cancelled cheques which bore Punch's endorsement in his bold, clear handwriting, a signature where the inspector knew very well. Notwithstanding a leaning towards the cheerful Punch Bennett, Inspector Miller was at once alive to the value of

these cheques as evidence if the case came into the Criminal Courts.

"And you say this large sum of money was demanded practically at the point of the gun?"

"Under the most vile threats, sir!" rasped the count. "What is more, I and my friends were fiendishly roped and flung into a filthy, damp cellar and left there until this brute had cashed the cheques and disposed of the money."

"What disposition did Bennett make of the money?"

"Monsieur, how can I know? Ask yourself that question. What does a thief do with money?"

"Ahem—yes! And you wish to lay an information?" asked Miller mildly, far from happy about the business.

"What is an information? I want the thief hauled up before a juge d'instruction or what you call him in this country."

"Yes, yes. We can make a police examination, or you can make a sworn statement of what you have told me."

"Yes, I'll do that."

Miller paused reflectively, trying without much success to decide whether this was all straightforward police work or if he would find flaws in the man's story when he came to examine Punch Bennett. Too many men had come through that door for no other reason than to enlist the aid of the police in a pursuit of personal vengeance.

"May I make a suggestion, Count de Brille?"

"But—certainly!" Brille could be pleasant on occasion.

"You may make your statement on the way out, but I suggest the police proceed with caution. I have had dealing with this man Bennett, and he is a wily gentleman. Possibly it would be better if I see him and learn his side of the story before—er—taking steps."

Brille's eyes sank into his handsome head. This was not what he wanted at

all. He had detected the smile on this police official's lips every time he mentioned the name of Bennett, as if the man were a sort of Robin Hood, tolerated by the police as no more than a harmless mischief-maker. Bennett could shoot more holes in his story than he cared to contemplate, and Ladoux would back him up. What he wanted was to have the man thrown incontinently into prison. In France his name and fortune would be sufficient to effect this—in fact, he had dungeons of his own—but these English police had the stupid idea that a criminal might have a contrary story to tell, and it seemed they would have the idiocy to listen to it.

"You can leave the matter in my hands with confidence," went on Miller smoothly. "There is this evidence of the extortion"—he picked up the cheques—"and I have no doubt just now that we shall arrest the man on the criminal charge."

That was more like it. Brille's eyes blazed with satisfaction.

"But I am wondering," continued Miller, "if there was not some slight provocation?"

"Not the slightest."

"You went with your friends to this farmhouse on a peaceful mission connected with your business—er—to correct a false impression?"

"Yes."

"And Bennett immediately assaulted you?"

"Yes." Brille's face tensed with sudden fear as he thought of his own defeat at the hands of Punch. Perhaps it was the knowledge that he had met his master which had sent him to Scotland Yard, imagining that the man would at once be thrown into prison on his sole representations. "What is more, sir, he smashed my companions to the ground with his fists—as gentlemanly and inoffensive a group of gentlemen as you could find in our unhappy France. Me"—Brille indicated his crippled

condition—"he treated in the most abominable manner, him a strong man and me as you see me—"

"Horrible!"

"The man is an apache, a fiend, a — But you will excuse me, I have told my story. I ask that you do your duty."

Jules was sent for, and Miller watched the count being carefully conducted along the corridor to the room where he was to make his sworn statement. He wiped his brow. It sounded like a shocking business. Never in all his career had he been so disturbed in mind. Like Sexton Blake, he had a grudging liking for Punch Bennett. He would have staked his life on it that Punch would never stoop to a rotten business like this. The man was a nuisance, but until now he had been no more than an amusing nuisance. Also, in all his escapades, he had carefully kept just on the right side of the law; often, as Miller suspected, more by luck than good judgment. He examined his notes with great care. Punch could probably shoot that lot full of big, jagged holes, but he would have to do some tall talking to explain those damning cheques with his large signature on the back. Proving that Punch had got the money from the bank would be child's play.

It was certain that Punch had obtained this large sum of money from Brille and his friends, and it appeared they had not parted willingly with it. Also, there was little doubt that Punch had unlawfully imprisoned the men in the cellar until he had negotiated the cheques. A nice kettle of fish whichever way he looked at it. The indictment was enlarging every minute. Miller was honestly sorry to learn of Punch being in such a pickle. First, he decided to speak to Sexton Blake about it.

He got the number and found the detective at home. Curiously enough to Miller, Blake was not in the least astonished at the Yard man's news.

"Did you know about this, Blake?"

"I know Punch's side of the story," said Blake, "and if you want some advice I would go to his farm and get that story first hand."

"But he got the money! I have the cancelled cheques on my desk!"

"Yes, he got the money," agreed Blake readily enough, but he stuck to his advice. "You see, Miller, this Brille is the nastiest little animal loose in England to-day."

"So that's the lay of the land?"

"I'm sorry to say it is."

"How is it that you know him?"

Blake told him that Brille was a client of his.

"But you don't usually deal with men like this."

"I propose to teach the man a lesson," said Blake, and that was all he would say. "It's a nasty kettle of fish and I would not go off at half-cock. I don't mind telling you that I informed Punch that he had better draw in his horns if he wants to keep out of prison."

"You did, eh? That's something. I suppose he told you he could paddle his own canoe?"

"Words to that effect," laughed Blake.

"What's the address of this farmhouse?"

"Highcliffe Farm, Bucks," advised Blake. "It is a mile or two east of Colnbrook."

"Thanks," and Miller hung up. He was more disconcerted than ever. Quite obviously Blake took scant cognisance of Brille's complaint, but these damning cheques were staring him in the face. It was an enormous sum of money. If he had only left the money alone he could probably argue his way out of a fracas which was no doubt six of one and half a dozen of the other. But when money is taken, and taken under duress, English judges can be scathing with their sentences. It would take a lot of provocation to explain

away this transaction. On the face of things this looked like a long stretch for Punch. He was sorry, but even Punch could not laugh off a hundred thousand pounds.

The inspector went at once to Superintendent Johnson's office and got confirmation of his plan of action. He was to call on Bennett and ask for an explanation. Also he was to take a warrant. If Punch merely treated the matter as a huge joke he was to be arrested; if, on the other hand, there was a reasonable defence further reference was to be made to this curious count. There was little doubt in the inspector's mind that the superintendent did not expect to receive any explanation satisfactory to the Public Prosecutor. He telephoned Blake out of friendship and told him what the police decision was. He knew that Blake would not warn Punch, and his faith was quite justified.

Blake put down the telephone and turned to Tinker with a chuckle.

"Punch will make Miller's head spin with his explanation."

"Are they going to pinch him, guv'nor?"

"That seems to be the idea," said Blake musingly, "but I don't think they have a case this time, and the complainant cannot come into court with clean hands. That means a lot to an English judge, and the Yard knows it."

The whole case was peopled with nasty characters. Blake was expecting a call from Jean Bartot and was not relishing the coming interview.

Inspector Miller found Punch very much at home at his farmhouse with Lieutenant Ladoux and Smithy about to sit down to lunch. Never in his life having had the pleasure of a purely friendly call from the police, Punch immediately took counsel with his rather loose ideas concerning the previous evening and decided he could argue his way out of that lot. His

warm and cheerful grin as he welcomed the inspector left nothing to be desired.

"Come in, inspector! What are you doing in this part of the world?" He made the introductions before Miller could get a word in edgeways, and the inspector found himself sitting at a table where Punch was prepared to share his rations before he knew quite what had happened. "Beer, inspector?" And Miller, glowing to his annoyance under this affable treatment, found himself accepting.

"Come to arrest me, or some such tosh?"

Miller gulped on his beer.

"I'm afraid, Punch, it's the rockpile for you this time. At least, that's how it looks to me and the superintendent."

So Brille had had the crust to go to Scotland Yard and cry out his troubles on the inspector's broad chest.

"Count de Brille?"

"Yes; he laid an information."

"I hope you fumigated the place after he left. Poisonous bloke if you get me, inspector—rank, positively foul."

"So I understand."

Lieutenant Ladoux seemed to have something to say. He knew all about rockpiles in France when the police talked about them.

"You joke, monsieur? It is not the arrest? Yes—no?"

"That's about the size of it," said Miller gloomily. He liked Punch, but duty was duty.

Punch put down his beer. The more he thought about it the less credence he could place in an information by Brille. The suggestion had a bad smell.

"Spoofing, aren't you, inspector? Pulling the Bennett leg to get the low-down on the doings—eh what?"

"I wish I was."

Not exactly to his amazement—perhaps to his admiration—Punch threw back his head and laughed.

"My sacred aunt! What a crust!

Inspector, what did the little hellion tell you?"

Inspector Miller could see no objection to giving this information. His instructions from the superintendent were quite clear on that point. He was to state the nature of the complaint, get an explanation, if possible, and make his own decision about the arrest. Holding nothing back, he told Punch exactly what Brille had stated that morning at the Yard.

"What's your explanation, Punch? I don't want to be precipitate."

For once Punch gave the inspector a serious recountal of the happenings the previous evening, exact in detail as to Brille's descent on the farmhouse, but somewhat slurred regarding the large money transaction.

"That's just your blasted trouble, Punch!" exclaimed Miller, with pardonable heat. "The man is evidently a liar and you had him cold, but you have to take the law into your own hands. Why didn't you tie them up, throw them into a car, and deliver them to the police station, instead of this foolishness with the money?"

"But, my dear old fathead, Brille's no good to me in prison; it was the money I wanted."

"You fool! It's the money that's going to stick you in prison for a long stretch."

"I don't think so," said Punch quietly.

Ladoux, jumping up and down on his chair as if it were a hot seat, could not contain his volatile nature any longer.

"But this is the beeg foolishness, the imbecile stupidity, the—Ma foi, inspector! The money it was the settlement most correct. Brille was there. So! The good Punch he say settle—yes—no? You compris? Brille he eager to settle to right the so great wrong to the poor Suzanne! You stupid inspector! You need the leetle fix for your head!"

"Half a mo'f I reckon my head's all right, Frenchy!" cried Miller. "Who the dickens is Suzanne? First I've heard of Suzanne."

"Suzanne?" cried Ladoux. He puckered up his sore lips and threw a kiss on the air. "She is the so-beautiful Marquise Suzanne Langtac, monsieur, and Brille, the beast, steal the diamonds from her. Now he settle, and you, you beeg foolish policeman, say rockpile. You have the cloud on the brain."

"I'm afraid I have," said Miller shortly, "and it'll be a complete fog if you fellows don't stop talking in riddles. Now, one thing at a time! I've heard nothing about diamonds."

"But the whole thing is simply crusted with diamonds," advised Punch. "Bushels of 'em!"

Inspector Miller frosted.

"I suggest to you this is a serious matter," he said stiffly. "Let's have some straight talk." The trouble in dealing with Punch was that he was cleverer than most people gave him credit for. He flicked here and there, darted in and out, wrapped up a serious matter in the same parcel as a piece of buffoonery, and finally presented a conglomerate of evidence and supposition calculated to produce the effect that he might have ridden precariously on the edge of wrong-doing, but he was a dickens of a good fellow and the Yard would have to wink at his adventures. "Those cheques are evidence and you had better talk fast!"

"Now, don't get shirty, old cock," said Punch cheerfully. He was not anxious to give Miller all the facts. "This is pretty hush-hush. International affair, fall of France, and all that sort of thing. You know, old detective, in our profession we can't betray a client, eh what?"

"That be hanged for a tale! You never had a profession!"

"And slosh came the tin of tomatoes full in the bloke's face! Really,

inspector, such a remark to your host!"

"Shut up, Punch, for the love of Mike, and get down to cases! Who the dickens is this Suzanne in the Brille mess?"

Punch poured a mug of beer and stuck it in what he called the inspector's clutch.

"Wrap yourself round that and listen! I'll be brief, to the point, and distressingly lucid. The strange and curious facts about this poisonous little pervert, Count de Brille, are that he brought some jewels belonging to the said Suzanne, who is a spiteful little she-cat, to England. Thereupon—foully, most unjustly, and criminally to boot—the said pervert hung on to said lovely jewels. Now, I ask you, what should the poor robbed girl do?"

"Go to Scotland Yard, of course!"

"Ever hear of Punch Bennett, the world-renowned inquiry agent?"

"To my sorrow, yes. Here! Your story doesn't stand up! Blake told me he is making an inquiry for Count de Brille. Is this the same matter?"

Punch smiled.

"Blake's a wily lad. Brille came to Blake with a cock-and-bull story about the jewels having been stolen. Do you follow the tortuous ways of the little reptile? He stole them himself and went to Blake to make the story stick with Suzanne, only Blake didn't get bowled by that one."

"By Jove, you may be right! Blake did tell me he was going to teach Brille a lesson."

"Right?" exclaimed Punch. "This is the Q.E.D. stuff, the low-down, the bottom of the can as it were."

"Pretty murky business. Just what did happen last night?"

"I was having a consultation with Sexton Blake," said Punch impudently.

"Sort of pooling of great minds?" offered Miller sarcastically. "Go on!"

"Well, as I told you, I barged in here just in time to save young

Smithy from the poisonous rat. Then"—Punch grinned—"the gents on the losing side eagerly, clamorously, and all that sort of thing, wanted to settle."

"I'll bet! What did you use? A lighted cigar?"

"Don't be frivolous, inspector; these chaps are rats of the most repulsive species. They signed the cheques, I cashed them, satisfied my client, and then—well, here we are as it were."

"How much?" asked Miller flatly.

"One hundred and twelve thousand pounds, sweetheart."

"Phew! How much did Suzanne get?"

Punch obligingly took out the receipt and showed it to Inspector Miller.

"But that's only ninety thousand."

"But the damages, dear old sleuth. Good heavens, fancy a chap like you mucking about with the law all day forgetting the damages."

"Let's have it!"

"Smithy? Complete and devastating shock to his nervous system! The Court awarded Smithy one thousand pounds—er—quickly and cheerfully paid. Lieutenant Ladoux? Booted in the teeth by aforesaid Brille. The Court awarded him one thousand pounds."

"Okay, have your fun! That's only ninety-two thousand pounds."

Punch dolefully shook his head.

"My dear old inspector, you know these settlements out of court are frightfully expensive. You see, I was dealing with an eagerness you never find in the courts."

"I'll bet you were!"

"Really, I was overwhelmed," sighed Punch. "First this nasty cove insisted on paying my fee of ten thousand, and then the little Marquise—not a nice girl but generous—absolutely stuck out for paying it all over again."

"Twenty thousand quid! You ruddy robber! Good heavens!" cried Miller, "do you know I don't expect to earn

twenty thousand pounds in the whole of my life."

"But, then, inspector, I have to keep up an establishment. The Government pays the shot for you."

"Some establishment!" chuckled Miller, locking round the dilapidated room. There was no question about it, that receipt from Suzanne saved the situation for Punch, and it looked as if there would be an excellent defence if Brille persisted in his demands. He was quite sure the Director of Public Prosecutions would have none of it, especially when he suspected that Blake could add his quota of weighty evidence regarding the type of man they were dealing with. "All right, Punch, you win; that is tentatively, I shall have to report to the superintendent." He smiled. "In the long run I shall probably get you in the dock. S'long!"

Punch looked comically towards the door as it closed.

"Chilly sort of bloke the inspector at times," he said to nobody in particular. "One-track mind. By the way, Ladoux, I'm going after those diamonds. Like to sit in the game and draw cards?"

"I'd like to draw some diamonds," laughed Ladoux.

"You're on!" said Punch. "How about you, Smithy?"

"Don't be balmy, boss!"

CHAPTER 11.

The Scavenger.

SEXTON BLAKE'S consulting-room had witnessed some strange scenes in all the years of his considerable practice, and some curious people had swaggered in there only to be cut down by the detective's scathing tongue, but never at any time had a man more thoroughly disgusted him than this pompous political scavenger, Jean Bartot. He had an assurance almost

beyond bearing, a conscience as pliable and ill-formed as a lump of plasticine, and a sharp featured face as smooth in its expression as that of any confidence man plying his low trade along the Riviera in pre-war days.

He wore a bowler hat set on a head thatched with greased, black hair, an overcoat of a dressy cut, and, of all things, a pair of patent leather shoes surmounted by fawn spats. He carried a pair of yellow gloves and a rolled umbrella surmounted by a heavily crusted knob of gold. His excellent English was as slick as his person. Somehow or other he managed to gather all these impedimenta in his left hand and dart forward with outstretched hand as if his one ambition in life was to shake the hand of Sexton Blake and give him his full confidence. Blake adroitly avoided that Judas hand. He used his own to draw up a chair which was already well placed.

"You will find that chair comfortable, Monsieur Bartot."

One could not phase this fellow by so obvious an affront as a withdrawn hand.

"Ah, yes, thank you." He placed his hat on the floor, dropped his gloves into it with a flourish, and laid the elegant umbrella exactly in place in line with the table. "So you are the renowned Mr. Sexton Blake. Well, I never did. So charmed! So very charmed! I have heard of you—ah, so very frequently." The mountebank shook a playful finger. "The so fierce enemy of all bad men, is it not so? I must mind what you call the P's and Q's."

Blake, disgusted in his very marrow with his flourish of words, lunged right into the heart of his inquiry.

"I have a few questions to ask you, Monsieur Bartot."

"But, yes—of course!" Bartot looked blandly around the room his sleek face almost shining. Tinker wondered what sort of a razor the man used to get his face to that smooth perfection.

In a good heat the skin food would probably make an oily mess all down his face. "Anything at all, my good Meester Blake, anything at all. I am yours to command."

"You are engaged to marry Madame la Marquise Langtac?"

"Ah, monsieur, the beautiful Suzanne, you have perhaps the acquaintance?" He blew an airy kiss. "I am the most fortunate of men."

"And it was due to your peculiar offices," said Blake, "that this group of people decided to turn their resources into diamonds and come to England?"

"Helas, my poor, poor France," moaned the man who had milked his country like a Jersey cow.

"And they paid you a large sum of money for this information?"

"But, yes—naturally." He was perfectly open about it. His conscience was as dead as a beefsteak and as flabby. "You must understand that there is the little present here and there. So expensive, so very expensive."

Blake's lips curled with disgust.

"Bribery?"

"The little present," contradicted Bartot, "your English words they are so 'arsh, so very 'arsh."

"I think for my purposes I prefer to call spades spades," Blake said briskly, but did not phase the man. "You got this information by a system of bribery from Government officials, and then sold it to Count Brille and the rest of the trash?"

"So 'arsh," said Bartot smilingly, as if Blake had told him a joke. This stern-faced Englishman was so like his London fogs, not like the clear sunshine of his beautiful Paris where the little intrigue was a matter of course. "You must understand, monsieur, that if I had not done these people the great kindness they would have lost everything to the Boche." He cocked his head on one side as if to say, I have

you there. "That sort of thing has its price."

"If you like to prostitute your honour, sir, it is not my business."

"Honour?" smiled Bartot and playfully shook his head. "Monsieur should understand that I have no honour, it is too expensive."

The smooth scoundrel! Blake could hardly contain himself.

"It is as well to understand your curious code, Bartot."

"A pleasure, monsieur."

"I think we shall quite understand each other."

Bartot's eyes twinkled.

"If it helps, monsieur, the information was for sale, I bought it for a price and sold it for a higher figure. That I think is what you English call good business. And I get the beautiful Suzanne as well. I am the most fortunate of men."

"God help you and your kind when France is freed."

Bartot threw back his head and laughed with bubbling glee. "No-no, monsieur, you do not comprehend. My poor France is one beeg quarrel, everybody quarrels, and nothing is done. Pouf! It will be the same for ever and ever. We are lighthearted, monsieur, we live for the little moment."

Blake's mind dwelt momentarily on the sturdy peasants of France whom this type of man had betrayed and wondered how his rotten philosophy would go down with them; but he said nothing. Words would be wasted on Bartot.

"I suppose you know all about these diamonds?"

Bartot beamed.

"But certainly, monsieur. Monsieur," he confided. "I could not sleep for thinking about all those beautiful diamonds."

"Just tell me what you know about them."

"Monsieur. It was one of my few failures, so well arranged and so stupidly unsuccessful. I gave the good

advice to buy the stones and—ah, we have our—bad luck, you say—yes—no?"

To the astonishment of Sexton Blake and Tinker the man jumped to his feet as if he were on springs, took off his jacket, folding it neatly over a chair, and rolled up an immaculate, white shirtleeve. He revealed a long cicatrice, newly healed, which could only have been made with a sharp knife such as the Apaches of Paris use. Blake thought at first that the fellow was going to tell him that he had received the hurt in defence of the stones, but the last barrier went down and he howled with laughter when Bartot told him in a hurt and aggrieved tone of voice that Jules, Count Brille's servant had delivered the slash when he, Bartot, went at night to get the diamonds.

He glowered at the laughing Blake.

"Of all the inconsiderate curs, that one, Jules, is the worst. I paid him one hundred thousand francs to let me steal the diamonds and promised him a million more when I had sold them, and he stabbed me. That was a thing the most rotten that has ever happened to me. Monsieur, I was mortified."

Admonishing this bird was pure waste of time, Blake was sure of that. The man was unique. This was Lot an act, Bartot was thoroughly aggrieved that Jules had rounded on him after bargaining to allow the man to steal the diamonds.

"So Jules took you for a ride?"

"But no, monsieur. I, Jean Bartot, was not, what you say?—born on the damp Saturday afternoon. Mais non! Certainly not! I was wounded in the 'ead, and ha, ha, ha!—wounded in the arm, too—ha, ha! It was an affront of the most terrible. I have friends. The low fellow Jules was brought to me and I cut a piece off his arm—he made a sweeping slash with his hand down the fleshy part of his forearm—like that! Jules, he pay me back two 'undred thousand francs."

"I can see you are not easily set upon," said Blake, letting all thought of sarcasm go by the board with this man. "What happened next?"

"Count Brille came to see me and told me I must not try to take the diamonds again."

"Count Brille?"

"Ah, that one!" The infamous fellow actually shuddered. "He—ugh! No, monsieur, I do not try to steal from Count Brille again. He is the devil. He smile at me"—Bartot passed his hands over his eyes as if he would ward off something evil—"then he grip my arm. Ma foi! He terrifies me. Then he twist my arm and throw me in the corner—crash! Grrh! And he sit in his chair smiling like the devil."

"Do you mean to say that Jules informed Count Brille of your attempt to steal the diamonds?"

"That is the regrettable conclusion I have reached, monsieur."

Blake wondered if Bartot was leading him up the garden path, the man would lie or tell the truth with exactly the same assurance. He was that strange and rarely met animal, a good liar.

"I have a theory that you and Suzanne were concerned in a plot to steal the diamonds before Brille left Paris. You were very close to Brille, I am informed, before he went to the aeroplane."

It was almost funny to watch the slick little man as he absorbed that suggestion, his eyes recessed in tricky thought. One fact Blake saw at a glance. Suzanne? Bartot undoubtedly did not have the diamonds but, quite patently, he was turning over in his mind that Suzanne might have been in league with one of the other men to make the steal. Had his pretty Suzanne done him in the eye?

But the smiling rascal was quite able to speak lightly, whatever he was thinking. "That is your idea, monsieur? Suzanne? But of all things

that is the most funny—so very droll—and me, I am to marry Suzanne? Yours is perhaps the good guess. Me, I had the silly idea that Count Brille was like a banker's vault, that nobody could take anything away from him. Suzanne, eh? It is of all things the most funny," he repeated.

"It strikes you as possible."

"Ma foi, monsieur! Anything is possible with a fortune like that." The Frenchman was still considering the intriguing matter and Blake knew that a mind like that, keyed to nothing but crime on a lavish scale which could keep clear of the police, would be thinking to some purpose. Bartot would not hesitate to carve a piece of flesh from Suzanne's beautiful arm if it would help him to his goal. He rose quickly, his mind made up. "Monsieur, I think I shall have something to say to my beautiful fiancée." In the act of picking up his hat and gloves he checked abruptly. Instantly, Blake got a new impression, that of a sharp-faced rat in action, all the bloom of his laughing assurance gone. This was the criminal type which lords it over the Paris gangs. He began to think that Suzanne was in for a warm quarter of an hour. "You have your very good reasons, monsieur?" The question was level and urgent.

"No more than an indication," advised Blake. "A friend of mine collected a hundred thousand pounds from Count Brille and gave it to Suzanne—or—less a commission, of course. Suzanne laughed at him when he gave her the money. I am wondering why she laughed."

"You think—" Again that reflective pause and Blake was certain the man could think to some purpose when trickery was suspected. "I have the exact perception, monsieur. If Suzanne has the diamonds and this friend of yours collected her share from de Brille it would be of all things the most droll. A pretty wit, monsieur.

I must have the little conversation with Suzanne; but she must not laugh alone, we shall laugh together."

Used to the sudden cruelty of the French gangster, Blake issued a stern warning.

"Take care, Bartot! The writ of King George runs in this country, and the police don't like it if women are punished—er—physically."

"Monsieur," smiled Bartot, "I am of all men the most careful."

He gathered up his belongings, bowed elaborately to Blake, then to Tinker, and strutted away with quick, mincing steps.

"After him, Tinker!" cried Blake as soon as he heard the front door close.

The best tracker in London snatched up his hat and darted down the stairs. Tinker knew positively that the Frenchman was on his way to the Hotel Splendide to have that conversation with Suzanne, but in work like this there was many a slip between the cup and the lip. He took a taxi and followed the cab in which Bartot was riding.

As expected, the Frenchman got out at the Hotel Splendide and darted to the lifts. Tinker was forced to wait for a full minute for the next lift, but he was certain as to where his quarry had gone. He went to Suzanne's suite. The door was ajar. Carefully he pushed it forward. There was no sound of voices. He walked in. A second later he came hurriedly out, his face as white as chalk. He had seen the little marquise lying on the floor against the wall. Her head was lolled forward, not a pretty sight. Her neck was broken. Tinker raced downstairs, but there was no sign of Jean Bartot.

Feeling miserable about things, he rang up Sexton Blake and told him what had happened. Blake immediately rang up the Yard, and made his way to the hotel at once. The lure of the diamonds had commenced to take its grim toll of death.

CHAPTER 12.

Speculation.

SENSING some connection between the murder of the Marquise Suzanne Langtac and the unsatisfactory examination of Punch Bennett following the curious complaint Brille had made at the Yard, the authorities quite logically assigned Inspector Ed Miller to the case. He arrived at the Hotel Splendide at the same time as Sexton Blake. Miller brought with him a murder squad complete with camera, fingerprint apparatus, and all the grim paraphernalia of their calling.

The woman's body lay in a corner of the room, a crumpled heap, pathetic, a sad reminder to those matter-of-fact policemen that intrigue and trickery where social outcasts are concerned can only have one end, when unbridled passions are loosed.

Sexton Blake was particularly tactful, his eyes searching here and there in this gayly decorated chamber of death, but offering no comment. The rich red of the curtains, flaunting their riot of colour over the body of the strangled aristocrat, vaguely annoyed him. It was a bizarre, macabre note he could have dispensed with to his entire satisfaction. He had already learned from Tinker that Bartot had arrived in the room a few minutes ahead of him, and it would now be necessary to determine if the man had rushed into the suite with instant and cruel murder throbbing in his mind, or if he had arrived on the scene to see the same grim sight which had confronted and shocked Tinker.

That Bartot would hesitate at murder was not worth considering for one moment. The man who had used a knife on the wretched Jules out of sheer maliciousness could have sunk his cruel fingers into that marble neck without a tremor. On the other hand, if he had darted into the room only to find his fiancée lying on the floor murdered, he was not the type to organise

immediate inquiry by the police. The forces of law and order were Bartot's natural enemies. His instinct, confronted by that body, would be to leg it at once and manufacture an alibi.

On the man's record alone the police would pick him up at once and subject him to a searching examination. Blake was inclined to think that the time element excluded Bartot. Even a man of such colossal wickedness as this political scavenger would indulge his habit of sneering talk before he killed the woman. Blake had no intention of rushing his fences. Unquestionably the man had left Baker Street and gone directly to this room to have it out with the dead woman.

Apart from a number of reasonable doubts, the murder could have been consummated in a matter of minutes; possibly in a matter of seconds. The swift accusation, the woman's scornful reply, and a murderous passion could come to boiling heat. Swiftly, in blind unreasoning temper, the long fingers could dart out and fasten on that fragile neck. A savage twist, and all Suzanne's urge for intrigue would become a nothingness.

Then the hot eyes of the murderer would become lively with alarm. There would be no remorse, just the animal instinct to be gone to some burrow where he could be hidden from the eyes of accusing men. Yes, Bartot could have murdered the woman.

Sexton Blake seemed to be detached from all the activity in the room, the expert work of the fingerprint men, the watchful eyes of Inspector Ed Miller, the blinding flashes of the bulbs of the photographers, and the careful examination by the police surgeon. His broad forehead was furrowed. It was one thing to argue from a fact to a conclusion, but quite another matter to build a case on speculation. The Dickens of it was to separate one motive from another, one criminal from his fellow. Why? Why? Why?

Nothing Blake had said to Bartot, or

even suggested, could give rise to such unbridled hate. Bartot had engaged himself to marry the woman. He was probably under no illusion that Suzanne had regarded it as no more than an arrangement of convenience, a barrier she had erected against the evil importunities of this wicked Count de Brille. In English minds it might all seem a horrid, calculated business. But Jean Bartot was a Frenchman. Marriages of convenience were a daily occurrence in France. And a marriage was a marriage in France, carrying with it a substantial power to the husband quite unknown in England.

Bartot, once the vows had been given would have assumed a substantial control over Suzanne's property, and whatever her rights she would not have denied him that control. If, as Bartot may have supposed, she had bested him in the scramble for the diamonds, he, unlike Brille, was such a merry scoundrel his cue would not be murder. That would be stupid. He had only to marry the woman. Obviously, the waiting game was the course to take.

Blake involuntarily nodded his head in tune with his thoughts. All this was so much mental gymnastics, necessary to the careful examination of a crime, but of no more exact import than the gyratory motions of a trapeze performer. Common sense made him discard Bartot as the murderer, but he could not entirely eliminate the possibility. A man with the instincts of a murderer would kill, given the provocation.

Whether that provocation had been there present, some scornful remark from Suzanne, he would never know. On the other hand—and that was more satisfying to his mental processes—was that the crime bore the imprint of Brille's cruel handywork. Motive?—Opportunity to murder?—Method of murder? On the first and third counts, Brille fitted the ghastly business like a hand to a glove.

If, by some means best known to her-

self, Suzanne had secured the diamonds, motive shrieked to high heaven. Sexton Blake, despite Punch's certainty, staunchly clung to the opinion that Brille did not have the diamonds. The man was surrounded by a group of unprincipled adventurers, all of whom could have been tempted by Suzanne. However, setting the matter of the diamonds aside, Punch's dealings with Brille had provided a real motive.

Blake did not charge this against Punch because the airman had acted with commendable honesty in his dealings with Suzanne. In the final analysis, however, he had handed to the woman a large sum of money filched from Count Brille. He had done more. He had provided Suzanne with a weapon which enabled her to send Brille about his business, and Blake could see her flinging it at the crippled little devil with high scorn, not realising that she was signing her own death warrant. Brille's power over the woman would be gone if he could not get the money back again.

This speculation sent Blake's mind exploring a lot of new territory. He was thrust back squarely against the diamond inquiry. If Suzanne had the diamonds Brille's hold over the woman had vanished. But Brille undoubtedly did have a hold over Suzanne, a fearful and ghastly grip which she had freely admitted. Thus, pursuing this argument, he had to admit that Suzanne could not have stolen the diamonds.

There was just one possibility, however, which could not be overlooked. Blake knew he was dealing with a group of unprincipled men. The leering, horrible Chateaufort, for example. Supposing Suzanne had plotted with Chateaufort to steal the diamonds, only to find herself out of a limb when the crime had been consummated? And supposing Brille knew that Suzanne had not obtained the diamonds, that she in turn had been tricked? He was at once thrown back on the money

angle. He decided to follow that line of inquiry.

First he must know that Brille had been in the hotel, that he had had the opportunity. Checking the cripple should not prove difficult.

"Miller"—he addressed the Yard man—"see if Count de Brille has been in the hotel to-day."

Inspector Miller, who had been watching Sexton Blake with some care, shot up his head, his eyes loaded with inquiry.

"Brille, eh? You think—Brille?"

But Blake shook his head. He could allow his own thoughts to range through the entire gamut of possibility, but he was not the man to be rushed into blunt accusation based on so fragile a structure.

"I just want to know."

Miller gave some instructions to one of his men and learned in a matter of minutes that Count de Brille and his servant, Jules Cambert, had been in the hotel and had been shown to Suzanne's room about an hour before the arrival of Tinker.

"Good heavens, the cripple! Incredible, Blake!"

"The possibilities are," said Blake dampeningly, "that Brille can give a good account of his movements." He shook his head. It was too simple, but went nicely with his own ideas. "I think I would get hold of Brille and this man Bartot. We know they were both here and could have murdered the woman. On the other hand, the hotel is full of people." Again he shook his head. "You see what I mean, Miller?"

Possibly Inspector Miller did see the point, but he was a policeman, wanted action, and wanted it fast. He felt he was entitled to round up these two men and hold them for examination, which, perhaps, was what Blake had in mind when he made the suggestions. Miller gave some crisp orders over the telephone.

But, cutting devastatingly into these speculations, came a shattering report from the fingerprint man who had been working with his apparatus in the corner of the room. He was a mild-mannered little man, bespectacled, with shaggy eyebrows which should have given him a fierce appearance, but somehow or other made him look as benign as a sheep. He had an apologetic manner of speaking, as though he lived in perpetual fear of the truth, but was determined to speak that truth though the heavens fall. Blake knew him well, and regarded him as the most reliable man on fingerprints in Europe.

"Ahem!" he coughed apologetically. "I think—er—perhaps—er—in fact, I'm sure, sir—"

It was difficult to determine whether he was addressing Miller or Sexton Blake. They both walked across the room and observed that the man was working over a set of prints, using the little scored glass for the Henry classification of prints of all ten fingers. He had just concluded a telephone conversation with the Yard, and was inwardly gleeful that identification had been made in thirteen minutes instead of the standard fifteen minutes for the job.

"What is it, Tom?" asked Blake. "Found something to confound us?"

Tom nodded apologetically.

"I'm afraid I have, sir—er—and I'm afraid you won't like it. I—"

Miller broke briskly into this talk.

"Let's have it!"

Blake was not likely to shy away from unpalatable truth. He observed that Tom had been working over a necklace of large, synthetic pearls, the glistening beads delicately dusted. Quickly his eyes travelled to the body of the dead woman, over whom the police surgeon was standing. Already blue in death, a series of marks showed where the pretty trinket had been pressed savagely into the woman's

neck. So that was it. On the pearls must be the fingerprints. Indubitably the murderer! Judging from the face of the fingerprint expert, the prints had been identified at the Yard. That ruled out Brille, Blake was sure of that; and he doubted if Bartot's prints were on record at the Yard. The man must be Bartot or Jules Cambert, probably the latter.

"Jules Cambert?" he asked Tom.

A smile of appreciation shimmered along the old man's nervous lips.

"You knew all along, sir?"

"Just a guess."

"Cambert it is, sir. Jules Cambert. The Department say they got his prints in connection with some confidence trick he pulled on an Englishman in Paris some years ago." Tom's eyes seemed troubled. "A confidence man, sir, not a murderer. I—I think I would prefer to step down to the Yard and check the prints myself, but I—I don't think there can be any doubt." He looked at Blake, his head quizzically on one side. "Does it fit, sir?"

"It does not," stated Blake bluntly; "but we had better not argue against your facts, Tom." He spoke rather shortly to Miller. "Well, Miller, there's your man!"

"Yes." But it was obvious that the inspector did not like Blake's vexed appearance. There was something more, something indefinable, which was upsetting the Baker Street detective's calculations. "We know this man, Jules; he's the count's servant, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is."

"But he came up here with the count."

"Yes."

"Then—"

"You have all the facts," said Blake, "and so has Tinker. You had better set your minds to work." That was all he would say. The vision before his mind was too ghastly for contemplation, it went so deeply into this morass

of depravity that he hardly dared to say what he thought. "You have nothing to worry about, Miller; pick Jules up and hang the man. Better pick up Bartot and Brille as well; I think it will pay you."

"But—Blake! You've lived with this business, what do you think?"

Sexton Blake walked across the room and looked sadly down at the swollen neck of the murdered woman. Slowly, almost sadly, he shook his head. He knew now who had stolen the diamonds. Miller had all the facts and he had better do his own thinking. Blake's mission was the diamonds, not solving murders.

"I think I will get some fresh air, this place is foul with horrible things. Come, Tinker."

Without more ado, to Inspector Miller's surprise, the two of them left the room at once. In the cab Tinker looked at his chief's grim face and asked a worrying question.

"What happened, guv'nor?"

A savage grimace momentarily twisted the great detective's face.

"If you can bring your mind to hold the shocking thing, that crippled pervert, Count de Brille, forced his servant, Jules, to strangle the poor woman, and I have no doubt he sat in his chair and watched it happen with diabolic glee. The man's an animal, Tinker, a thing we've got to exterminate."

"Do you think the Yard will get him, guv'nor?"

Slowly Blake turned and looked at Tinker.

"You have all the facts, old son, examine them. Remember we are commissioned to get the diamonds, and after I have had a chat with Chadagne of the Surete, I think my case will be complete."

"Complete? guv'nor?"

"Exactly." Blake appeared to change the subject. "If the Yard lay their hands on Brille or Jules within a week I'll buy you a new hat; that is, unless

Brille gives the man up to the police."

"Gives him up?"

"Very much on the cards, Tinker. You are dealing with an extraordinary mind." Blake almost shuddered. "We must move fast if we are going to lay this gang by the heels before the final horror."

Tinker's mind ran fearfully to his friend, Punch Bennett.

"How about Punch, guv'nor? I'm sure he is going after Brille."

Blake shook his head.

"I did my best to warn him. If he barges in there his life won't be worth a thin sixpence."

"Good heavens! Guv'nor, we've got to get there first!"

"Please God we shall," said Blake fervently, "but I do not know where 'there' is. I put a man on Brille's tail and can only hope he has hung on like grim death."

CHAPTER 13.

Who Is Jules?

NO man willingly boasts of the criminal exploits of his country, and police officials are not exactly mines of information regarding their cases. But where the interests of justice are concerned, memories can prove to be exceedingly well stored with a mass of detail. Thus it was with some reluctance that Sexton Blake's friend, Monsieur Henri Chadagne of the Surete, now a refugee in London, was persuaded to examine his memory in regard to Jules Cambert, Count de Brille, and the group of wicked men against whom Sexton Blake was now pitting his vast powers.

Indeed, before Chadagne could be persuaded to talk, Blake found it necessary to give him chapter and verse for the business which now had been marked by a cruel and dastardly murder. He was particularly anxious to learn what he could of the connection between Brille and his servant, Jules Cambert.

Chadagne, an elderly and experienced Sureté, official now approaching the retiring age, proved communicative on that point, but it was clear to Blake that there were reticences regarding the activities of Brille and his friends. The Sureté man, when the debacle came in France, had taken advantage of the chance to come to England, where he had at once placed his services at the disposal of the Fighting French. Blake understood that he had already carried out a number of investigations for the Fighting French committee which had enhanced his excellent reputation.

"Jules Cambert, mon ami?" he said to Blake; "of him I can tell you much. But De Brille—ma foi!—it is not nice, so un-French—so, what you call the stink."

"Then supposing we stick to Jules Cambert," suggested Blake, who knew that Chadagne might be drawn later on when he had warmed to his subject.

"Bien! Certainly! Jules Cambert is the little fellow, the hanger-on, the small-time scavenger—ten thousand francs here, a thousand there. Pouf! Not for the great minds, eh, Blake?"

"He certainly murdered Suzanne Langtec," advised Blake, "and there was not much 'Pouf' about that. He left his prints all over the woman's necklace."

"His prints?" Chadagne stroked his goatee reflectively and polished his glasses with considerable care. He was pondering the obvious, examining it in detail, because in police work he did not like the obvious. "That is not good. Not in a case of murder. It was not the crime passionate?"

Blake shook his head.

"Just a shocking, cold-blooded business, and I think Brille was looking on with approval."

"Ah, that one! But the prints? We must examine the incredible. You have more to tell me? The little something in the back of your mind, but so important."

Blake nodded and smiled. Chadagne knew his way around.

"They were the only prints on the necklace," he said dryly.

"A—ah!"

"I thought that would stir you."

"Stir me!" exclaimed Chadagne. "I am all shook up like the cocktail. The necklace, it does not jump on the neck; she put it on and she take it off. Suzanne or her maid? Not so? And the maid or the so unfortunate Suzanne she have not the needs of the criminal for the gloves. Why not the prints of the maid or Suzanne?"

"My guess is they were deliberately wiped off," was Blake's answer, drawing out his man.

"Brille?"

Blake nodded.

"But that is the foolishness. The stupidity! Brille, he is not so stupid." The Frenchman's eyes twinkled intelligently. "You still keep back the little something, n'est ce pas?"

Sexton Blake decided to enlarge the matter.

"Brille is a man easily traced. He could not enter the hotel in his chair with a servant attending him without being observed and remembered. What is more, he was shown into the room by the floor-maid. You see, Chadagne, there is a clear trail. Then the police come and find the woman on the floor strangled. Bartot was there, but the prints on the necklace seem to eliminate him—"

Chadagne broke in excitedly:

"Yes—yes! Go on! I am of the great interest! The strangle, it is the silent murder. Quick! The sudden throttle before the cry of anguish come from the pretty lips."

Tinker shuddered involuntarily. He saw no reason for the graphic description, even if there was no relish on the shrewd face of the Frenchman. That was the trouble with most foreigners. A bit on the dramatic side. Tinker was trying to see through the evidence which was exciting the Sureté man.

What was the peculiar significance of this necklace carrying only the fingerprints of Jules Cambert? Quite clearly the woman who put it on and took it off should have left prints.

Blake continued in his even remarks, and Tinker followed closely.

"But Brille is not going to risk his neck even if he did run away."

Again Tinker was puzzled, but Chadagne was not.

"The excuse of a cripple. Yes?"

"Exactly," said Blake. "Not much of an excuse to us fellows, but no English jury would convict him on the capital charge."

"But naturally!" Chadagne's excitement grew apace. "The excuse—she is planned before the murder. But the details? The ensemble? I do not have the picture."

Blake further enlightened Chadagne by telling him of Brille's plots to marry the woman. Brille had made Suzanne dependent on him for money, but Punch Bennett had broken that hold. The probability was that Brille had found it impossible to get the money back and restore the original dependence of the woman on him. She, no doubt, laughed at Brille—that annoying laugh of intriguing amusement which had so angered Punch. Then the sudden resolve to kill her. But Blake could not see that the plan was as sudden as the resolve. Brille, if he could not break the woman, had no doubt decided on the method of killing before he went to the room, a grim ace card up his sleeve if the woman proved obdurate. The use of Jules and the tricky work on the necklace were not the decision of a sudden-heated moment.

"This is my conclusion, Chadagne," Blake went on briskly. "Brille decided to argue with the woman. Undoubtedly he knew that Bennett had given her that large sum of money. Therefore, he went to her room with a double plan. Either she returned the

money or he would order Jules to strangle her. Then there were the implications, of course."

"He killed the two birds with the one—er—squeeze, eh, mon ami?"

"That's about the size of it. Then he made himself scarce, first wiping off the necklace in this particular manner."

Tinker, still listening intently to these two veteran criminologists, continued to flounder. They slipped too quickly from point to point before clarity reached his mind. As far as he could see, Brille had gone to the woman's room either to recover the money or strangle her, as his master had suggested. The latter grim alternative had been carried out. So far, it was clear. What all this business with the necklace amounted to was beyond him, but he knew something tricky had happened. Personally, he thought Brille had slipped badly, leaving any prints on the necklace at all. Then he had legged it, and that action from Tinker's point of view landed the man in the soup at once. If Brille had removed all trace of the murder before he left it would have taken some doing to get a rope round the neck of the little monstrosity and his crooked servant. Murders have to be proved beyond peradventure of a doubt in the criminal courts, and if Brille had removed all trace of the crime, all he had to say was that the woman was alive and well when he left the room. Brille knew he was a conspicuous man because of his deformity, so he had gone there openly; which was not the expected act of an intending murderer. There was no getting round that point.

The murder had taken place in an hotel teeming with people. If Brille's defence was that the woman was alive when he left the room, and his servant corroborated that statement, the police would be thrown back on a "murder unknown" case, which might be a dead end because they would be handicapped by the reasonable deduction

that Brille had, in fact, engineered the murder, but they could not prove it.

But the man had left a clear trail. The marks of the necklace were on the neck of the strangled woman, and Jules' prints were on the necklace. Then the two of them had legged it, and nobody knew where they were. Open and shut case, thought Tinker, and all this serious talk between his master and Chadagne seemed to be no more than flogging a dead horse. He expressed his ideas with all the certainty of a young man.

Sexton Blake smiled. Chadagne, to Tinker's chagrin, laughed merrily.

"You talk like the so young policeman!"

"Oh, I don't know!" said Tinker, wishing he had kept his mouth shut in the hearing of these experts. "It's all over except the rope for Brille and Jules!"

"Aha, my young friend!" And Chadagne wagged a playful finger. "The certainty! It is the gift of the young mind, but it will not do for the old ones, eh, Blake?"

Blake had to agree, but there was no point in poking fun at an excellent assistant like Tinker.

"You see, Tinken, what Monsieur Chadagne means is that this is a case where an apparent stupidity covers a very cunning scheme. Brille is a cripple. Suzanne was strangled, and I have no doubt that in the circumstances which arose Brille had predetermined that she must die. But he was not going to kill her. Not our tricky friend, Count de Brille! Jules must do the killing. Then Brille, the careful master, says: 'Look, you fool, you have left your prints on the necklace, give it to me!' Brille takes it, and wipes off all the prints except those of Jules. Why? He cannot possibly care if Suzanne's prints were on the necklace, but he is very anxious to leave evidence that Jules is the murderer. But Jules is watching him,

carelessly, perhaps, but watching him. So he does wipe the necklace, but only the part Jules has not touched."

"But Brille was there, guv'nor! Then he legged it with Jules! That's plain guilt to my way of thinking!"

"Granted," nodded Blake. "But you forget he is a cripple. In his chair he makes a pathetic figure. Here is this man, Jules Cambert, with a criminal record. Brille represents himself as hopelessly in the toils of his servant. He has just watched Jules murder a woman in the most fiendish manner. He tells the police he was in mortal fear of his life. Jules whisks him away in his chair and out of the hotel. He dares not open his mouth to give the alarm because Jules carries a sharp knife. Then, he tells the police, that Jules takes him into hiding and holds him there!"

"Gosh, I see, guv'nor! What a swine!"

"Yes." Blake turned back to Monsieur Chadagne. "You agree?"

"But certainly."

"And now we come to the true purpose of my visit, Chadagne."

Monsieur Chadagne smiled quietly to himself. It was always so with Mr. Sexton Blake. First the hors d'œuvre, always relishing, and then perhaps a portion of fish, but always the main course, solid as England. But this time he was not quite happy about things. It would have been so different if only he had at his instant disposal all the intricate records of the Sûreté in Paris, now, alas, in the hands of the hated Boche. Press a button and then, hey presto, the information was to hand; and even the renowned Sexton Blake would sit up and take notice. Now he had to rely on his memory. So many criminals and so many of them of such diabolic cunning, one poor head could not contain it all.

Jules Cambert, it seemed, had been a sort of privileged waiter at the café of the Black Cat in the notorious Rue du

Chat in Paris. It was a disreputable place owned and operated by an evil old woman named Madame Soulange. Blake knew the place well.

Many times the police had raided the place only to learn nothing more than they already knew: it was a hang-out for a disreputable gang of small-time thieves and criminals. But what could madame do? These men came into her cafe for their beer and cognac and she served them. Ma foi! How could an old woman know that these men and women were jail-birds? It was unanswerable.

What the police could not learn and never did learn with any exactness was what really went on in the commodious upstairs rooms of the cafe; rooms richly furnished, where rare wines and fine living was obtainable at a price. And other things! These other things were whispered about and that was all.

The police knew, of course, that gentlemen in evening clothes would be slipped along the dark street, which was the Rue du Chat, under complete protection by the very men who would have stuck a knife into them and robbed them of their purses and jewellery if they had not been under direct orders from Madame Soulange. All this was suspicion, but not knowledge as demanded by the courts. Of one thing Chadagne was certain, and that was that no gentlemen from the Boulevards or the district of the Etoile and the Champs Elysee would have dared to venture into that unsavoury neighbourhood unless they were certain of that ample and secure protection which unfortunately the police could not provide.

These men slipped into the Cafe Chat Noir like shadows of the night. On the occasions of police raids they simply vanished into thin air, probably by cellar passages which ran in veritable mazes under the buildings of old Paris.

"It was whispered freely in certain

circles that Count de Brille and his friends went there for blasphemous gatherings," advised Chadagne.

"The black mass?" asked Blake, not surprised.

Chadagne wore a horrified appearance.

"So it was rumoured, monsieur. And other things! There were killings, I am sure of that; bodies horribly mutilated picked out of the Seine. Depravity!" he cried. "The beastliness! Helas, my poor France!"

Sexton Blake thought grimly. What with political scavengers like Bartot, and men of the kidney of Brille and his friends, it was a wonder France had not fallen to pieces even earlier in the war. But he was not the type of man to distress a man like Chadagne, so obviously distraught at the complete disaster which had overtaken his beloved country.

"And you say this fellow Jules was a sort of waiter in this place—perhaps a kind of major domo?"

"Yes, my friend, that is so."

"And his crimes, for which he was convicted?"

"Confidence tricks!" Chadagne shook his head glumly. It was all of a piece with these shocking goings-on. Some fool of a youngster, vicious, with more money than sense, lured to one of these wild gatherings at the cafe of the Black Cat; then the inevitable blackmail from the sly and slimy Jules. "Shall we call the spade the spade, mon ami? Blackmail! The young fool thinking he had taken part in a terrible crime. Then Jules, he pounce. You pay me so many thousand francs and I keep my mouth shut!"

"I see." Blake did not ponder the matter for long. It was, of course, supposition, but it did not take much of a stretch of imagination to decide that Jules must have some terrific hold on Count de Brille. Enlarging on this, it was conceivable that the grip he had on his master when they lived in France might be exceedingly flimsy.

Possibly Jules had committed his knowledge to paper, duly secreted in a safe place, but in England the tables had possibly been turned. But, whatever supposition proved correct, the fact remained that Brille had now worked a master trick. Unknown to Jules, the Yard was now in possession of convicting evidence that the man had murdered Suzanne. Count de Brille had played that card with uncanny care.

Knowing Brille as he did, Sexton Blake expected to learn that Jules had delivered up any papers he had, and he also expected in due course to learn from the Yard that the wretched man's body had been fished out of the Thames. Brille was the type of man who had a certain faith in sudden death as a cure for some strange diseases. But, on the other hand, it might amuse the perverted little rat to strip Jules of his means for further blackmail and then hand the man over to the police to be hanged. Dealing with de Brille was like probing the unknown.

Blake thanked Monsieur Chadagne and returned to Baker Street. Already he had spread his own nets in addition to the hue and cry set on foot by the Yard to discover the present whereabouts of Count de Brille and his friends.

What happened to that gang of criminals concerned him not one whit, but Blake was exceedingly worried that the happy-go-lucky Punch Bennett had taken on rather more than he could handle this time. Once Brille got Punch into his power Blake hesitated to think what might happen. It would not be a nice death.

CHAPTER 14.

The Stalking Horse.

WHETHER the little god of good chance or the imp of mischance was sitting on Punch Bennett's

shoulder on the day Suzanne was murdered remains to be seen. Suffice it to relate, therefore, that Punch was in the West End that day doing what he called beetling around the haunts of the lads with Smithy as chauffeur in his small car. Thus he was parked opposite the Hotel Splendide when he saw Count de Brille and Jules coming out of the building looking like an expedition for distant parts. Punch, living always on the extreme fringe of the law, knew stark fright when he saw it.

Count de Brille seemed to be bearing up nicely almost to the point of amusement, but Jules was shivering with abject fright. It was as if he was itching to ditch the invalid chair and run for his very life. Brille seemed to be getting some curious fun by enlarging the man's fears. Punch could see the sarcastic lips moving, dripping with soft venom which was changing Jules into a palsied maniac.

"Smithy, m'lud, those guys have been up to something."

Smithy turned his shrewd face in the direction Punch indicated, and a twist of fear seized him as his eyes fell on the little monster in the wheel chair. Not if he could help it would he again get within reach of those terrible arms.

The bloke pushing the chair ain't 'arf got the wind-up, boss."

"I think we'll do a spot of trailing for the good of the cause," suggested Punch.

"Not 'arf!" And Smithy jabbed his foot on the starter.

The pair they were watching got into a taxi-cab. It was quite a performance. First Brille, wincing with discomfort, was lifted into the cab, then the elaborate chair was taken up with some difficulty beside the driver. Jules was beside himself with anxiety to be gone, and Brille was taking a marked delight in exciting the man's fears by his measured movements. Finally he was seated to his satisfaction, and Jules

sprang in beside him. The doorman closed the door and waved the cab away with all the respect due to a departing guest of some importance. Smithy made a quick turn and followed discreetly behind.

Count de Brille, putting distance behind him from a cruel murder which must be discovered by the police in a short time, was far more anxious than he had appeared when he was getting some sadistic amusement from the shivering man beside him. Jules would be eating out of his hand from now on, and he was already toying with the idea of killing the fellow or handing him over to the police—when certain little matters had been straightened out, of course—for the grim business of hanging as practised in this outlandish country. He looked out of the back window and saw at once that Punch Bennett was following him quite openly in his small car.

It was now Brille's turn to find his blood boiling with sudden rage, not unmingled with fear. But the Frenchman, being the type of man he was, immediately set his tricky mind at work. If only he could pay Punch back in kind for the humiliation he had put on him at the farmhouse the other night!

He made no attempt to render Punch's course difficult, the driver steering an uninterrupted route for the house in Hampstead where his confederates lived.

Punch, not caring a hoot whether Brille had seen him, told Smithy to come to a halt a piece up the street from the house where Brille stopped. The immediate chase had ended, and Punch was concerned with Smithy as to ways and means of entering the house under the cover of darkness. A lot of dubious knowledge went into that survey.

At length Smithy gave his considered opinion.

"It's a set-up, boss!"

"You mean that skylight, m'lad?"

"Not 'arf! Bit of treacle paper and a glass cutter and there you are."

Punch nodded non-committally. Considering the type of man he intended to rob, and the rats who surrounded that man, he was all in favour of barging into the house—smashing a back window, for instance, unhooking the catch and taking a chance on the inmates. He had already taken their measure, and was prepared to do it again. Climbing over skylights and getting to the scullery floor through a jagged hole in the glass was always a messy business. He heard the sound of a car starting in the lane behind the house.

"Hop round, Smithy, and see what's doing!"

Inside the house there had been rather more doing than Punch had anticipated. Brille came in shaking with rage. His plans had been made, and he was determined to get this big man in his power before the day was much older. He gave orders with the precision of a military commander. The curious lot of men who followed his evil lead sprang into some semblance of action.

"Jules has murdered Suzanne," he told them.

Chateaufort, who looked like a hideous gargoyle done in wax, came mincing forward, his eyes alight.

"Brille, my dear, tell me! Was it with the knife? Oh, why was I not there?"

"He strangled her."

"Strangled!" exclaimed Chateaufort in his high-pitched voice. He shook a playful, admonitory finger. "That wasn't friendly of you, De Brille! Really it wasn't. You know I've never seen a strangling. Did her eyes pop out?"

Judging by the looks of disgusting relish on the other faces they were all highly interested in the ghastly business.

"We've got to get out of here, all

of us!" snapped De Brille. "Leave everything and get into the car, the police will be along shortly."

"Yes, messieurs!" Jules was beside himself with terror. "Quickly! The police!"

Chateaufneuf's waxen features opened in a grin of sheer delight.

"Look at Jules!" he screamed. "My dears, look at Jules! Why bother running away, De Brille? They can only hang Jules——"

Jules gave one look at the old man and started to dart round the room in a paroxysm of fear. "I'm going, if you don't!"

"Going, my dear?" Chateaufneuf halted the servant and caressed his neck with an effeminate hand. "Hanging should be better to watch than the guillotine."

Jules struck the man's hands away.

"Shut up, you dirty pig!"

Chateaufneuf, hearing these words spoken by a servant, recoiled as if he had met up with the unutterable Thing. There was a sudden fastidiousness mixed with his mounting rage.

"You dare!" He lifted a cane he was carrying, and brought it across Jules' face like a whip. "You dare address me so!" The cane came whistling down again and again on the man's face, and he suffered the hurt like a dumb animal. "Canaille!" A last vicious cut and the cane was broken across the angry man's knee and the pieces tossed into the corner as if this perverted aristocrat could not put his hands again to a piece of wood which had come into contact with a menial.

Chateaufneuf turned to the count.

"De Brille, you are safe? The so stupid police, I mean?"

"Oh, yes!"

Jules, with another start of fear, winced at the easy assurance of his master.

Chateaufneuf was cackling with high-pitched laughter.

"He, he, he! Let's hand Jules to the police and watch him sweat. I'm the best liar in Christendom if they ask questions. Or"—and his eyes receded in strange amusement—"we could hang Jules ourselves. That would be fun. He, he, he!"

"I have other plans!" snapped Brille. "That brute, Bennett, followed me from the hotel. He is up the street in the small car there." They all rushed to the window and craned their necks, but nobody dared to make a move out of the house, they had seen Punch's powerful arms at work. "We are going to the country house at once!" ordered Brille. "You, Chateaufneuf, will be the stalking horse for Bennett."

"My dear, that will be fun! I'm a wonderful liar, and awfully clever—awfully, awfully clever. He, he, he!"

"It won't be fun if you don't deliver this man to me to-night."

Chateaufneuf's face fell.

"My dear, I told you I am awfully clever. 'Pon my word, I'll get him!" His big head fell sideways in ghastly contemplation. "We shall have to think of something horrid for him. I'm very inventive. Oh, my dears!" And he danced with sheer delight. "The dogs! That would be too, too wonderful!"

"You can skin him alive for all I care!" snapped Brille, and shot his chair forward at speed. "All of you at once! Into the car!"

Jules, as if he had received a reprieve, raced through the door and started the car.

Smithy, watching the men bundle into the vehicle and leave at top speed, raced back to his master.

"They're legging it, boss, all of them!"

Punch nodded abstractedly. Knowing nothing about a country house, he seemed to have accomplished his immediate purpose in discovering this Hampstead residence. All that re-

remained was to break into the house and search it. It was all to the good if the occupants had gone to cover. In the meantime, he could think of lots of better occupations than trailing this bunch of misfits round London.

"Hop in, m'lad, hare and hounds is an over-rated game. We'll go back to town and work on our ration cards."

But three happenings in that quiet street were to put a definite period to Punch's easy mood and launch him into a sea of trouble over the odds even for a man of his ingenuity. Firstly, Chateaufort came out of the front door of Count de Brille's house and walked towards Punch's parked car, a smirk of amusement on his lips. Secondly, an obvious police car discharged two equally obvious detectives at that same house before Chateaufort was fifty yards away. Thirdly, a newsboy came racing along the road yelling, "Horrible. murder!" and Punch bought a paper.

The murder of Suzanne had crowded the war news out of the headlines. The reporter had done full and complete justice to as horrible a killing as had occurred in London for many years. The paper stated that an arrest was expected shortly.

Punch whistled his amazement. The sudden decamping of the gang of Frenchmen was explained. And there, a couple of hundred yards down the road the due processes of the law had commenced to operate.

"Who got done in, boss?" asked Smithy.

Punch was angry and gruff.

"Suzanne! Some swine strangled her, and it looks as though it was the Brille exorcism."

"Blimy! The lousy little pig!"

"Exactly!" Punch pursued an obvious line of thought. "And he's running away from the lads from the Yard. Consequently he is going to hole up at once. The question is, Smithy, m'lad, does he take the diamonds with

him or leave them in the house?" He grinned. "Not even that diseased squirt would leave a packet like that behind him, so it looks as though we go on playing hide and seek."

Punch's roving eyes fell on the foppish Chateaufort mincing along the road in his role as stalking horse. He started to laugh. "It's real, Smithy! Blimy if it isn't real! Looks like Satan disguised as a Christmas tree. What a wart, Smithy! We'd better nobble the guy and toast his pants against his legs until he tells us where the home ground is." He delivered a cheery smile in the general direction of the approaching man. "Looking for something, my noble lord?"

Chateaufort, figuring some tricky scheme to get into Punch's confidence, was taken aback by the direct approach.

"Well—er—no, my dear, I—"

"What was that?"

"I—I said—er—no, my dear—er—"

Punch smothered his amusement, but Smithy spluttered.

"Well, darling mine," grinned Punch, "supposing you come for a nice ducky ride with nurse?" He got out of the car, towering over Chateaufort.

"But really I—"

"Make up your mind, sweetheart," laughed Punch, caught the little monkey by the seat of the pants and tossed him into the car. "On your way, Smithy."

O.K., my dear!" grinned Smithy impudently, and set the car in motion. "Do we go to our cute little farm, darling?"

"Shut up! Yes, the farm!"

Punch said a few appropriate words to his prisoner about making a noise, and promptly gave himself over to a new set of thoughts. By grabbing the man he decided that he was one up at the turn, but he was not quite sure about that tricky smile on the strange face of the man beside him. Hang it, the man had nothing to laugh about,

and there he was chuckling and making noises like a laughing hyena. It was just faintly possible that the tricky Brille was using this ape as a stalking horse. Either way it suited Punch. Brille was no great opponent despite his twisted ideas. There remained the massive fact that Brille had in his possession an almost unholy fortune in diamonds. At least, Punch thought Brille had the diamonds, which amounted to the same thing with him.

One thought stabbed insistently in Punch's mind. Speed was now the very essence of the dubious undertaking, he had in mind. The Yard was after Brille, and the man was as conspicuous as Nelson's monument on a London street. His chances of keeping out of the clutches of the smart boys at the Yard for more than a few days were nil.

Also, Sexton Blake was vigorously interested in the doings, and that was a factor of more importance to Punch than ten Scotland Yards. But he would never admit that to Blake, not in any circumstances.

CHAPTER 15.

Retribution.

HENRI DE CHATEAUNEUF, not having been with the gang that visited the farm on a previous occasion, had no unpleasant experience of the place. Punch was quite prepared to attend to that omission if the man proved slow in furnishing the information he required. Chateaufneuf, used all his mis-spent life to elegance, was inclined to sniff at his surroundings. He seemed offended that he had been brought to such a barrack of a place in complete disrepair, and could not understand how it was that Punch, who had the outward appearance of a gentleman, could live in such a hole. Punch could have told him with a broad smile that he should see some of the holes he had lived in.

A meal was prepared in sombre silence. Smithy cast a lot of anxious glances at Punch. He could not understand what had got into his boss. Surely he was not worried about this sniffing Frenchman? A plaintive plea from Chateaufneuf that his feet were cold brought a snap of irritation to Punch's voice.

"Stick your feet in the oven and bake 'em, you fool!"

"Monsieur is not very courteous," complained Chateaufneuf in his high-pitched voice.

"Courteous? Suffering cats!" Punch simply looked at the man. Then, as if his long stare had brought the answer to a posed question, he threw back his head and laughed. "Got it! By the Lord Harry, all you need is a lemon in your mouth to make you look like a baked trout."

"Ain't he just!" chimed in Smithy.

"My dear!" The Frenchman was shocked. Was he not one of the most elegant boulevardiers of pre-war Paris?

"And if you don't stop talking like a woman I'll stuff your mouth full of cheese and pour ale on top until you run over. Was it original sin that made you look such a poisonous skunk?"

Chateaufneuf licked his lips with a moist tongue.

"I refuse to hold further conversation with you."

"Hoity-toity, fathead!" scoffed Smithy, and chuckled the man under the chin. "The guy's threatening us, boss! Shall I smack it?"

"No, get your supper, it might wobble. All right, Chateaufneuf, fall to. Bread and cheese; and bully beef, too, if you've got your ration card. If you haven't it's just bread and cheese."

The Frenchman made no move.

Complete disgust appeared to be getting under Punch's skin. Never before had he set eyes on such a slimy reptile.

"On your hoofs! If you curl your lips at my grub I'll tie you in the pig-sty where you belong and shove your head

in the swill. Good enough for you, anyway."

Chateaufneuf evidently thought discretion was better than any feeble valour he might possess. He minced over to the table and nibbled at a piece of bread and cheese. He had no ration card.

"Wash your plate and mug!" Punch ordered when they had finished.

"Blimy, wash his plate and mug, boss!" cried Smithy. "His lordship'll soil his blinking fingers." He turned his impudent face to the outraged Frenchman. "Won't you, pretty? But we ain't got no servants, darling," and the boy helped the man towards the sink by playfully kicking his flabby rump.

Punch, watching the man, was of two minds. Disgust for the whole boiling lot of them possessed him almost to the exclusion of everything else. Almost he was inclined to let the "diamond stakes" go by the board and turn this fellow out into the chilly Buckinghamshire countryside at once. But he had made certain lighthearted boasts to Sexton Blake, which placed the matter on a different footing. He pointed to a hard chair by the kitchen stove.

"Sit there!"

Chateaufneuf dropped his dishcloth as if it were a contaminated thing and gingerly seated himself. Thank God De Brille and the others were not there to see his discomfiture. As the best liar in Christendom and an awfully clever fellow, on his own admission, he was not exactly coming up to his advance notices. Moreover, as a continual dabbler in the black art of inflicting pain in other people, he was shivering in his boots at the thought that this big fellow might do him an injury. He could not bear pain of any sort. He no longer had any thought that he could bring the man in triumph to De Brille's house.

"Do you think I might go now?"

"Go?" Punch had not thought of

that. His anger was still a consuming fire. The nasty little sweep, just like all the rest of them, murdering women and running all over the place like a noisome disease. "I ought to take the lot of you and drop you down a drain where you belong. No! You can't go! Where is De Brille?"

Chateaufneuf started out of his deadly lethargy. What an opening the man had given him! Perhaps he would go to the place of his own accord to continue his feud with the count—that would be marvellous. But he must make sure. A smile of renewed confidence trembled on his lips. If he could work this, what a time he would have afterwards boasting how he turned this big man round his little finger and contrived to get him to the place. He was sure De Brille would have organised an excellent reception.

Better not appear too anxious at first, Bennett might smell a rat.

"You don't mean any harm to my friend?"

"Harm?" cried Punch. "I'd like to strangle the little rat!"

"My gracious! Dear, dear me! And the poor fellow a cripple!"

"Put a sock in it!" growled Punch rudely, utterly fed up. "Look here, funny face, don't get it into your head that we're playing post office." He took up a sharp ham slice, which he had no intention of using, the other watching the murderous action with wild alarm. "Where's Brille?" he thundered.

Chateaufneuf could watch that sort of thing for just so long. His mind emptied of everything except his knowledge of the quick work which could be done on a man with a sharp knife. His chair tumbled backwards and he darted back to the wall, cringing and slobbering with fright. This was dreadful for an old man. He had witnessed a lot of knife work in Paris, in fact, it had been one of his favourite amusements, but he had always been one of the audience.

"Please! You mustn't! You really

mustn't!" The sweat was glistening on his forehead and beading down his waxen cheeks. "I'm an old man—a very old man." You mustn't frighten me, my dears—my heart—oh, my heart!"

To advance matters Punch made a murderous sweep through the air with his gleaming knife, looking most fierce.

"I s'pose you don't want me to 'old the bloke nice and 'andy, boss?" suggested Smithy with great seriousness. "Which part of the blinking hanatomy would you like to carve?"

Chateauf, his eyes bulging, found his knees knocking together until they were quite unable to support his weight. He slithered to the floor, slobbering disgustedly.

"I—I—anything——" In his extremity he had forgotten Punch's sole question.

Punch stood over him, a grim smile on his face. Nothing wrong with this man's heart, just frightened. He pricked the man's thigh and Chateauf screamed in a high falsetto voice. He would never be able to stand a slash.

"Brille's address?" thundered Punch.

Some slight brain-power seemed to function again. How silly! This was the big stupidity! He remembered now. Here he was for no other reason than to give Punch the information he was demanding, and he was hesitating.

"Yes—yes, my dear!" he cried eagerly.

"Mind! I told you not to call me that again!"

Smithy, thinking he was entitled to enter the affair after his ghastly experience with Brille, came rushing down the room brandishing a butcher's knife with the grandfather of all blood-curdling yells piercing from his lips. Before Punch could stop the young imp, Smithy made a prodigious sweep with the knife, as if to plunge it into Chateauf's rump. At the crucial moment he adroitly turned the knife and brought the handle against his target.

But Chateauf had only seen that sort of game played in earnest. He gave a shriek of anguish and raced down the room, his fat little legs going up and down again like two unwieldy pistons, Smithy after him in full cry..

Punch gave it up and sat down by the fire, laughing until the tears ran down his cheeks. The spell was over. His immediate anger was gone. Ordinarily he would have reprimanded the young urchin, but this fellow was outside the pale.

"Shut up, Smithy!" he ordered finally, and then wearily put his one question to Chateauf again. "Where is Brille?"

Chateauf, warily watching his tormentor, breathing heavily, blurted out that Count de Brille was at the Manor Castle, near Windsor.

The Manor Castle? Punch was given to wonder. He knew the place, a big barn of a medieval keep almost beyond habitation except for a few rooms which had been renovated. Brille and the gloomy castle seemed to fit. The great, forbidding place, with its dungeons and great banquetting hall, was just the type of place he would want as a setting for the wild and fearful orgies which surrounded the man's name like an aura of evil. He had gone to earth because of the police, yes, but the little reptile could not change his spots.

Punch picked up Chateauf's belongings.

"Hat!" He tossed it over. "Stick and overcoat! Show it out, Smithy!"

Smithy came forward with pleasure. Despite Chateauf's protestations that he did not know where he was, that he had not walked two miles for years, he was incontinently taken outside. Punch did not know that Smithy helped the little beast on his way with a well-delivered kick in the rump. Anything connected with Count de Brille was so much venomous poison to Smithy.

But Chateaufeuf was to remember that kick in due course of time. And Smithy, when he found himself looking horrible death straight in the eye, was to remember it, too. The game had yet to be played to its ghastly finish.

The adventures of Chateaufeuf during the balance of that night as he tottered along twisting lanes in a Stygian darkness were many and troublesome. At long last he was receiving some measure of punishment for his iniquities. But the cantankerous soul of the man did not see things that way. He was writhing to wreak a terrible vengeance against Punch Bennett and the imp of hell who lived with him.

By three o'clock in the morning he had reached the end of his tether. His tottering walk became a feeble shuffle, then he sank slowly to the ground, gasping like a landed fish.

By some miracle of judgment an Army lorry just managed to come to a grinding halt within a few inches of the prone man. The driver and his corporal sprang to the ground.

"Blimy, a man, Bill! Mighty close shave! Dead, d'yer reckon?"

The driver placed an inquiring hand inside Chateaufeuf's waistcoat as his corporal used a torch.

"His ticker's still fluttering, corporal. Gosh, what a poisonous-looking bloke. Foreign, too."

"Lift him aboard," the corporal ordered. Speculations regarding foreign-looking gentlemen discovered unconscious on the king's highway in a military area were better deferred to superior officers.

At an Army headquarters Chateaufeuf was speedily revived. For reasons best known to himself he made no mention of Punch Bennett, and told an incoherent story which sounded pretty thin. The duty officer called in the local police. The foreigner's papers appeared to be in order, but it was better to be safe than sorry. By day-time reference had been made to the Special Branch at Scotland Yard by

telephone and the man identified as a refugee Frenchman. It was in this altered atmosphere that Chateaufeuf became indiscreet to the subsequent satisfaction of a certain gentleman at the Yard. He stated that he was anxious to get to the Manor Castle, near Windsor. A kindly pity, which the Army men could not know was misplaced, resulted in Chateaufeuf being taken to the gloomy castle in the side-car of a motor-cycle which was proceeding in that direction on duty.

It was ten o'clock in the morning before the printed sheet of daily occurrences reached the desk of Inspector Ed. Miller. He picked on the name of Chateaufeuf in an instant and immediately connected it with Brille and the murderer of the Marquise Langtac. He telephoned the local police, and after some inquiry at the Army headquarters learned that Chateaufeuf had proceeded to the Manor Castle, near Windsor. But it was noon before he got on the road for that destination with a squad car full of robust policemen.

By that time a great deal of dirty water had flowed under the bridge which spans the river of evil events.

CHAPTER 16.

The Gloomy Castle.

AS Punch and Smithy arrived in the early hours of the morning the great castle rose out of the night like a faintly etched deeper blackness, a place of deep foreboding, crumbling battlements rising above the ancient keep, the remnants of a spiked portcullis hanging crazily above a bridge of black timbers which spanned the dark waters of a wide moat. Here and there a faint lozenge of light, high in the ancient walls, passed and was gone, as if some ghostly watchman was making the rounds in the light of a flaming torch.

There was no light from the renovated rooms, which occupied a wing of

the main building on the far side from where Punch stood, but a faint emanation of light seeped upwards through the broken masonry from chambers which must be below the level of the moat. Light meant occupation. The probabilities were that Henri de Chateaufort, in the extremes of his fears, had told the truth. No doubt Brille and his henchman were in the building, up to some devilry or other. Punch checked over the castle with a grin on his face.

"What ho, the warder, eh, Smithy?"

"Not ari, boss!"

This mass of crumbling stone was a new experience even for a second-story expert of such undoubted attainments as Smithy. No rules seemed to apply.

"The front gate is open," suggested Punch tentatively.

"Too blinking easy, boss."

"My idea, exactly." For once Punch was undecided. "I've a sort of hunch that the Chateaufort excrecence was sent to me as a stalking horse, although he did not act the part very well." He turned sharply, hearing all round, like the watch on a submarine. There had been a movement in the bushes a few yards behind him. "Did you hear that?"

"Only a blooming rabbit," suggested Smithy, who had become used to the noises of the countryside.

* But Punch had turned at speed and had the sorry satisfaction of seeing a man leap to his feet. The next second the fellow seemed to dart through a hole in the wall of darkness and vanish. It was no use following the blighter.

"Wonder who he was?"

"Just a scared poacher," said Smithy encouragingly. His bravery was never more evident than when he was in the comforting presence of his master.

Speculating on the occurrence was a waste of time. Possibly, as Smithy had suggested, the man was a poacher. Punch could not know that his only hope of seeing another sunset lay in

that scurrying figure running all out across the fields.

Sexton Blake was not a man to let the grass grow under his feet, and the men he employed were never novices. The man who had startled Punch and Smithy was the tracker Blake had commissioned to keep Count de Brille under surveillance, and he was now going to inform his master over the first A.A. telephone he could find that he had tracked Brille to his lair and had run across Punch Bennett and Smithy on the spot, discussing a job of breaking and entering.

Punch, in his carefree manner, based in this instance on a supreme contempt for his quarry, was not inclined to squander much thought on the manner of effecting an entrance. In point of fact, there was no gain in wasting any more time. Here he was in front of a building he was determined to enter, and that building was encircled by a moat twenty feet across. There was only one entrance, and that entrance was wide open to the world and his wife.

"Let's beetle, Smithy," grinned Punch. "Easy on the noise, and keep your hand on my back. Have your torch ready."

"All set, sir knight!" chortled Smithy. In the darkness his face was beaming. Never in his wildest imagination had he thought he would have anything to do with storming a castle outside of a story-book. "Let's hack our way in."

"Pull your cap—er—your visor, of course—over your face, my doughty squire!" ordered Punch, capping the young fellow's mood.

They covered their white faces and stole up the ramp towards that wide-open gate. It might be a trap, but on the other hand it would probably take a team of horses to drag that enormous door of bolted oak across the entrance-way.

Not a sound disturbed the night. The darkness could almost be felt.

Smithy would have lost Punch in a couple of steps if he had not hung tightly to the stuff of his jacket. One reassuring thought was that if a trap had been baited Brille and his minions would have a supreme difficulty in spotting them in this same darkness.

The entrance to the castle was gained without mishap. Beyond was a cavern of darkness about thirty feet through, the sides being occupied with porters' house and the guardhouse. Immediately in front of them, above their heads, were dimly to be seen the cruel spikes of the portcullis. Punch checked. If the blasted thing were held there by ropes a cut with a sharp knife and they would both be transfixed to the ground. He whispered in Smithy's ear.

"Run like greased lightning!"

"What is it, boss?"

"Danger! Give me your hand!"

They leaped past the possible danger of the portcullis and sped through the dark entrance-way, coming to a halt in what appeared to be a huge courtyard impeded with jagged mounting blocks, which would make a fine mess of their shins unless they proceeded with great caution.

In the middle of the yard Punch checked again and took his soundings. If Brille was in the place he was being mighty cagey about it, or they were all fast asleep. But that light they had seen from the outside had not moved of its own accord. Across the yard, in a break in the masonry, they once more detected that errant and ghostly light coming from the depths of the building. In the keep proper the door was wide open.

"Will you walk into my parlour?" hummed Punch under his breath. But once more he found himself scornful of anything that bunch of misfits could do to him. It was so plaguey dark he was getting nervous from his own imaginings. Better barge in. That was always the best way, because the other fellow expected a stealthy

entrance. He loosened his Service revolver resting in a shoulder holster.

Taking Smithy's hand he went boldly forward again, his worries quite set at rest. The wide open door looked like the entrance-way into the Pit, but he could still make out that ghostly light coming from the lower regions. Punch imagined the door in front of them opened into the ruined banquetting hall, but he could not see anything clearly. Full in the entrance-way he paused again, strangely irresolute.

Smithy liked darkness rather less than he liked spinach, and that was not at all; but his nervousness was counterbalanced by the comforting strength of his boss. At the same time, he would have preferred to use the torch. Sooner or later they would have to switch it on as there was not a hope of finding a small package of diamonds hidden in this building unless they had light and lots of it.

Punch's thoughts ran along the same lines. At the moment he was amused. Of all the fatheaded-business he had ever put his hand to this took the cake. The chances of finding a package of diamonds in this great barrack of a place were practically nil. There must be a million hiding-places; it was not like a well-ordered house, where one could go unerringly to the safe and find the jewels.

In all probability Brille had engineered some safeguard for himself as there was probably a lot more to the fortuitous appearance of Chateaufort on the road that morning than had appeared on the surface. Personally he was not particularly enamoured of the idea of nibbling at a piece of cheese in a closed trap. The sensible thing to do was to beat it at once.

Brille had not hesitated to go to the Yard on a previous occasion, and he would do it again. There was no excuse for this business of entering an inhabited house even if it was a ruined castle. It was plain breaking and entering, even if there had been no

breaking so far. That meant a long stretch in prison if Brille could ring the changes on them.

On the other hand, to a man who regarded adventure as the meat and drink of life the urge was to go forward. But, clearly, he must use his wit. The best plan would be to track down the source of that light and saunter in, not in the guise of a burglar but as a curious visitor who had entered an ancient castle to examine a strange phenomenon. That was a part Punch could play to perfection. Yes, that was the plan. Barge into the doings with a cheery grin. Brille would not be taken in by it, but Punch knew the Yard would swallow it hook, line, and sinker. They had done it before, not because they believed him, but because nothing serious offered.

There was another point, too, which Punch was in danger of overlooking. Of course! Stupid not to have thought of that before! There he had been, outside the Hotel Splendide on his lawful occasions, when he had seen Brille and Jules loaded with fright, obviously making a getaway.

As a law-abiding citizen, he had at once followed the spoor with great zeal. Later he had seen the paper and redoubled his efforts. He grinned. By Jove, he might even get a police medal or whatever they gave for that sort of thing—certainly a letter of thanks from the Commissioner of Police. He whispered in Smithy's ear that forward was the word.

But all this plotting and planning was to die aborning. From below stairs, freezing the grin on Punch's face and setting Smithy's teeth chattering, came a cry of such utter anguish that these easily formed plans jelled into a fierce and unbridled anger.

"The darned muckers!" he growled through his teeth.

Smithy grabbed fiercely at Punch's hand. "What's that?"

Punch answered briefly: "Let's see."

They started forward on the half-run. It was their undoing. Just below knee-height a thin trip-wire had been stretched inside the doorway. Blindly they ran into it. Instantly, from the darkness there descended a rope net, heavy and ponderous, of ample dimensions, evidently a cargo net from some ship. Its weight brought the couple to the ground.

From out of the darkness came an evil chuckle and then the sounds of running feet, lightly shod, like the scampering of big rats.

Punch, never more keenly alert than in a moment of terrific danger, knew exactly what had happened.

"Don't struggle, Smithy; it's a heavy net. Hunch your shoulders and lift with me while I get my gun. Have your torch ready."

All round them now was the patter of quickly moving feet.

Carefully they raised themselves, tenting the net on their shoulders. Punch got his gun out and sent a shot viciously at the first sound of feet. The bullet whined and ricocheted through the vast hall, echoing and re-echoing into nothingness.

"Light, Smithy! Quick! Swing it round, then out!"

"O.K., boss!"

Smithy was perking up considerably. His master's shot had been reassuring to him. Punch could hit the ace of spades at twenty paces. They would get out of this mess with ease.

He switched the light on and shot it round, as instructed, but all it did was to show their captors the hopeless state of their predicament. A howl of triumph came out of the darkness, and immediately a number of pulleys creaked on the floor. The heavy net stretched taut with such speed and power that Punch and Smithy were dragged to the ground, the former's Service revolver being torn from his hand and sent hurtling along the floor.

Punch, hopelessly entangled, knew that the first round had been played and lost.

"Sorry, Smithy, but this seems to be it."

Punch was cheerful enough, but there was no disguising the fact that he was in the hands of a gang of murderers.

"Not a chance, boss!" cried Smithy. He had drawn out his most treasured possession, a formidable scout's knife, which he kept honed to an incredible sharpness. The rope severed under the knife like twine. Already he had freed his hand. "I'm cutting my way out."

"Good lad!"

"Huh—got my shoulders out—I—" There was a sudden piercing scream from the boy. Out of the darkness had come a pair of steely hands, and he knew he was once more in the power of Count de Brille.

"What is it, Smithy?"

"The Frenchman!" screamed the lad. "He's blooming well got me!"

"Lights!" came the cold order from Brille. "Be ready to turn them off if he's got his pistol."

The lights from four portable flood lamps came blindingly into Punch's eyes. At once Brille saw that the game was won. The pistol was ten feet from the big man, and he was hopelessly held by the great net drawn so excruciatingly tight.

"Get that pistol and tie him!" ordered Brille, and shot his wheel chair forward, dragging Smithy along the stone floor.

"Caught like a mug!" thought Punch as the little brutes swarmed over the net and roped him with fiendish skill. The net was removed at once.

Punch, with much dismay, observed that they fixed the net into position once more and arranged the trip wire to catch the next intruder. This was a blow between the eyes. Almost he gave everything up as lost. A brutal

murder had been committed, and Punch was willing to back Sexton Blake and the Yard against any odds on their locating this castle in a matter of hours. Now, if the gang had another getaway, that trip wire would prevent a surprise. He knew that the entrance to the great hall would be pitch black even in the daytime.

They carried them both below and threw them on a stone floor in a great charnel place dimly lighted. Their captors were taking no chances. Side by side the two prisoners were securely pegged to the floor under two more nets. There was no hope of rolling to one another and loosening the fiendish bonds with their teeth.

Brille, sitting in his chair, looked sardonically down at Punch and Smithy. The eerie scene was like some sombre painting of the triumph of Mephistopheles. His cold, incisive voice chilled the marrow in Smithy's bones and even caused a tremor in Punch's stout heart. But the big airman was not going to wilt to the satisfaction of this evil little monster.

"You have an English saying that everything comes to the gentleman who waits."

To Smithy's amazement, Punch's care-free laughter rang out in full note, derisive and ringing with contempt. In his extremity the boy looked at his master almost with reverence and then added his shrill note to the laughter.

Brille trembled with rage. The others, hearing that derisive laughter, found themselves in the presence of a courage they could not understand and crossed themselves hastily. Had this big man, who had mauled them so severely the other night, and pitted his strength successfully against Brille, some terrible card up his sleeve? He should be grovelling for mercy. They all knew the ghastly death which had been prepared for him.

"You will not find it amusing, Bennett!" came Brille's voice again, throbbing with anger.

"Y'know, old putridity," said Punch cheerfully, "I find it dashed amusing!"

Brille's curiosity got the better of his writhing anger. Was there anything he had overlooked?

"What is amusing?"

"I was thinking about poor Suzanne."

"You find that funny?"

"Strangling Suzanne funny; God forbid. No, you lousy little wart, I am wondering just how they will hang you. I suppose they'll have to sit you on the trap. Interesting—what?"

Brille's hands tightened on his chair until the wooden supports nearly snapped. His face whitened and the veins stood out like whipcord. His effort at control sent the perspiration to his forehead in great globules. Had Punch known it all that saved his neck from those talon-like hands, then and there was the gloating satisfaction in his mind that the big man would sing a different tune when he saw what they had prepared for him. With an effort he swung his chair away from his prisoner and wheeled rapidly up the room.

"Lights!" he snapped. "And you can open the door in the cage!"

He left the room immediately, a sinister, white-faced object, the embodiment of evil incarnate.

The remaining men, an effeminate group of sadists, went about their work with gleeful enthusiasm. Lights from a dozen portable floods shot a brilliant glare into the great room. At the far end was a caged-off enclosure about twenty feet square. A door, controlled by levers outside the cage, sent a door swishing upwards. Immediately, tumbling and snarling over each other, five great wolfhounds sprang into the cage, starved to fighting madness. Punch's eyes opened in sheer amazement. What did these swine intend?

Smithy's eyes were starting from his head.

"Boss," he asked in a woeful small

voice, "are they going to chuck us to them dogs?"

"Chin up, Smithy!" was all Punch could say.

Punch turned his head, and saw at once the source of those unearthly screams which had so startled and enraged him half an hour ago. Jules was standing on a heavy wooden raft floating in a great stone cistern which had evidently been used to contain the water supply for the castle in ancient times. A thin, hangman's rope was noosed round his neck and tied to a beam above his head, not tightly, but not loose enough to allow the wretched man to leap to safety. Punch had no pity for the fellow. He had been with Brille when poor Suzanne had been strangled. His eyes strayed along the great cistern. At the far end was a power pump, and Punch, expecting more beastliness, fathomed the grim situation in a minute. If they set the pump to work the water would lower gradually in the cistern, slowly hanging the nervous brute standing there shivering with fear. Punch ground his teeth in silent anger.

But he was not going to give these little beasts any satisfaction.

One of the Frenchmen came timidly forward and smacked Punch's face. He roared at the man with such fearful energy that he sprang back white and quivering.

"Run away, you filthy little popinjay, and tell mother to change your knickers!"

Another fellow smacked Smithy's face. Smithy spat with accuracy right in the man's eyes, and Punch laughed.

Like a bunch of familiars in the chamber of torture they herded together and made for the door.

"The seance, Monsieur Bennett," one of them called in a high piping voice, "will take place at ten o'clock this morning!"

The door closed with a dull thud. It was now six o'clock. That gave them four hours. Much could happen

in four hours if Sexton Blake ran true to form.

"Try and get some 'shut-eye, Smithy," Punch advised kindly. "We're hooked, but Sexton Blake will get us out of this lot."

"You think so, boss?"

"Nothing more certain, sonny!"

But it was 9.30 in the morning before Sexton Blake returned to Baker Street, tired and weary after an all-night session on another case, and found the message waiting for him from the man he had employed to watch De Brille. He had no illusions about Punch's predicament. These men had just committed a brutal murder in the heart of London. Never had Tinker seen his master's face so firm and set as he ordered him to get the Grey Panther round to the door at once.

"Old Punch you think, guv'nor?" asked Tinker anxiously.

"Yes! Quickly, Tinker!"

Even the thin wartime traffic was too heavy for the great detective's impatience. Before he was on the outskirts of London and could put the powerful machine to its full strength on the open road his knuckles were white on the wheel. Pray God he could be there in time. Punch's position was as hopeless as if he had been let loose in an asylum for the criminally insane with all the keepers under lock and key. Brille would live up to his reputation for unbridled lust and cruelty. The hands of the clock on the dashboard moved slowly forward, ten o'clock registered and fell behind as the mighty machine hurtled forward under the firm hands of Sexton Blake.

CHAPTER 17. Catastrophe.

IT was eight o'clock when Henri de Chateaufneuf, dropping with fatigue, came roaring across the ramp in regular army style, his companions the motor-cycle driver and his mate,

who was riding pillion, because of the passenger.

They came to a halt in the ruined courtyard. The driver looked round the scene of desolation.

"Nice cozy 'ome, 'Orace."

"Plumbing by Julius Caesar," observed Horace. "Y'know, Albert," he confided under his breath; "I thought this bloke was a bit touched from the beginning. He ain't got the right shaped head for a sane guy. Like a blooming egg, ain't it?"

Chateaufneuf, his head drooped forward, midway between sleep and a coma of exhaustion, was oblivious to these comments.

"Addled egg," said Albert, looking at their strange passenger. He nodded towards the entrance to the main building. "That looks like the front door, but I don't see no brass knocker. 'Ow about ringing the bell?"

"You blow a trumpet in a castle, fat-head!"

"Oh, ah!" Albert sounded a strident note on his horn. "Bit of a blinking 'istorian, ain't yer!"

"And now you've woke it up," observed Horace, noting a series of jerks which seemed to be Chateaufneuf's method of returning to consciousness. In Horace's opinion that strange head seemed to be by no means well fixed to the body.

Chateaufneuf looked sleepily around and suddenly realised where he was. The soldiers must come no farther. He stumbled out of the side-car and started to fumble for a couple of half-crowns.

"Don't go any farther, my dear," he said to the driver. Both men had alighted.

"My dear!" guffawed Albert. "'Orace, my darling, it's going to kiss you."

"Well, I never did!" exclaimed Horace, wide-eyed. "It's human, straight it is, you can see it breathing."

"It talks, too."

Chateaufneuf found his half-crowns

which were promptly pocketed by the army. But they were not to be deterred from going to the front door and making proper delivery of their strange passenger. Army missions required reports in due course.

The Frenchman tottered forward almost on the run, his face smothered in alarm.

"Don't go in there, my dears! Really!"

"Got to find nurse to give you a bottle," said Horace.

"Shut up, 'e might be somebody!"

"What—him? Blimy!"

They walked to the front entrance, and, finding it dark, they used a powerful torch.

"What in 'ell's that?" asked Albert, observing the trip-wire as a well-trained soldier should do.

"It's——" and Horace kicked the wire, bringing the great net tumbling down on him. "'Struth and not 'arf! It's a blooming burglar trap. Here, Albert, cut me out!"

Albert trained to direct methods when dealing with booby-traps in the Army got out his knife and made a complete mess of the cords holding the sling. That done, he tossed the now useless net into the yard and spoke shortly to Chateaufneuf.

"You ain't got no business leading a couple of innocent soldiers into a blooming trap like that. Afraid of burglars, darling?"

"Y-yes, that's ft, burglars! A big place like this and I am so—er—fragile."

"Ain't you got no servants?"

"Servants? Oh, yes, my dear, several."

"All right, sweetheart, 'Orace'll raise the roof!"

The soldier let out a yell which should have awakened the dead, but not a sound passed through the great door closing on the room where Punch and Smithy had somehow fallen asleep.

A low-browed manservant came to the door. Seeing the men in uniform he blinked uncertainly.

"Ouf, monsieur?"

Albert, who knew that much French, laughed cheerily.

"Brought your monsoor for you, found him drunk and incapable on the road."

Chateaufneuf tottered anxiously forward.

"Alphonse, tell these men they must go!"

Alphonse delivered himself of a string of French words like the rattle of a kettledrum.

"Madhouse, that's what it is," observed Horace.

"Does it mean anything?"

"It's Yiddish for vamoos!"

"What, no beer, 'Orace, just half a blooming crown, and that ain't even taxi fare."

"No beer," said Horace, "and all that blooming dust down our throats."

"Good-bye, darling!" they chimed, and mounted their bicycle, roaring their noisy way down the ramp.

The net gain to Punch and Smithy was one booby trap thoroughly out of commission.

Chateaufneuf had already tottered to the residential quarters where he learned that Bennett and the boy were bound and waiting for the seance at ten o'clock. The old man perked up considerably and waxed eloquent in praise of his own ingenuity in getting the couple to the castle. Brille thanked him.

At ten minutes to ten a couple of brutish French servants entered the downstairs chamber and set to work with methodical indifference to the beastly business which they knew was to go forward as soon as they had finished the preparations. First they raised the sliding trap at the back of the big cage and forced the hounds back into their den with the aid of long steel rods beaten to sharp points. The dogs growled and snarled, but the

men were expert at the job. They then took the nets off the prisoners, and each man drew a sharp knife.

Smithy winced and almost screamed as he saw those knives, thinking the end had come; but Punch reassured him, quite positive that Brille and his friends would be there to see the end, and that end would be something far more devilish than a stabbing business.

He tried to bribe the men.

"I'll give you fellows a thousand pounds to cut our ropes and let us go."

Smithy watched the men with a prayer in his eyes. The offer was met with stolid silence. Punch repeated his offer in French, and the result was the same. He increased the offer without the slightest result, and had to come to the conclusion that no money could buy men who knew somewhat of the cruelty of the crippled count.

"All right, end up on the gallows," he said irritably, and resigned himself to whatever was about to happen.

The knives were used with great care, every stitch of clothing being cut off the bound prisoners. Then the boots were carefully removed. This done they lifted the prisoners, one at a time, and placed them inside the now empty cage. Protecting themselves with the steel rods they quickly slashed the bonds and darted out of the cage, closing the iron door with a bang.

Punch, now pretty sure what was about to happen, waited until the cruel pain of returning circulation had subsided, then started to flex his great muscles. A quick work-out and then he was hard at work massaging Smithy. The boy was doing his utmost to keep a stiff upper lip, but the sound of those maddened, baying dogs was eating into the very marrow of his courage. The final blow came when the men removed his heavy boots, the usual weapon used by London street urchins for kicking snapping curs out of the road.

"Wot d'yer think they'll do, boss? I'm scared."

"You just think you are," said Punch kindly. "Let me work on your fingers."

Punch took the extended hands and massaged the fingers until each one was alive with tingling muscles. He then sat down, and Smithy learned another side of this man he so revered.

"No use kidding ourselves, Smithy, we've got to fight these dogs stark naked. That rules out feet. Feet are no use in a fight, are they?"

"Not much, boss," said Smithy, against his own convictions and managing a smile along his trembling lips.

"Of course not. Now, m'lad, I'm relying on you."

Smithy was incredulous.

"On me?"

"I couldn't tackle it alone," said Punch at once. He padded round the cage, eyes sunk in thought. "Got to get in some staff work," he grinned, and got an answering grin out of the boy. "They'll yank the trapdoor clean up, so it's no use tackling the brutes as they come into the cage, they'll come forward like streaked lightning. We'll fight them from the corner if they all come at once, you, behind me."

"I'll fight alongside," said Smithy stoutly, recovering quickly under this man-to-man treatment. "I ain't afraid of no dogs."

"Of course you're not, but we've got to use a spot of strategy. You keep behind me and do exactly what I say. When I get one to the floor you jump in and strangle him. Get those fingers right in past the skin and hang on like grim death. I'll tell you when. Get the idea?"

"Not 'arf, boss."

"That's the stuff, and don't forget we've got to spar for time. Old Sexton will be coming here miles an hour. Brainy guy, the old sleuth, he'll out-think these cockroaches without getting out of step."

"You're sure of that?"

"Positive," said Punch firmly; "and I don't mind betting a pony that a car full of Yard men is burning up the road. They don't go to sleep when they have a lousy strangling on their hands."

"No." Smithy was feeling better, but he prayed fervently all to himself that Sexton Blake would use an aeroplane.

The two servants had now placed a row of cushioned chairs about fifteen feet back from the cage. Punch watched the proceeding in shocked amazement. The offensive, putrid swine. The arrangement gave the appearance of a common occurrence, that these pervers staged this sort of show at frequent intervals for their amusement. Jules, his head noosed and his hands tied, seemed somnolent, resigned to a slow and lingering death. Punch could have little pity for the man, but he might have some knowledge of the diamonds.

"Jules! Where has De Brille hidden the diamonds? We might be able to wangle something if you know."

"That's my ace in the hole," growled the man on the gallows. "I ain't telling nobody. All these swine are interested in the diamonds, and if they think they are being done in the eye anything might happen."

"Just another brainless mug!" Punch said to Smithy. "From the look of the lad, his bargaining days are over."

The two servants now made their final preparations for what Brille was pleased to call a seance. They started the motor going, and the pump commenced sucking the water out of the cistern, spilling it down a lead gutter which presumably emptied into the moat. Jules blanched like a sheet and commenced to whimper. The pump was also spilling his life away. Punch watched the flow of water with the eye of an engineer, noted the capacity of

the pump, and made a swift mental calculation.

"You've got about an hour, Jules."

The man swore with fearful fluency in French.

At exactly ten o'clock the audience came mincing into the room. They were all in full evening dress, their faces flushed with wine, talking noisily and shrilly in their high-pitched voices. Count de Brille, his face like a death mask, was given the place of honour in his invalid chair in the centre of the row of armchairs. The men seated themselves like so many noisy young idlers waiting for the curtain to rise on a first night. Chateaufort's face had the grasping look of a drug addict almost beyond his patience for a supply of his favourite narcotic.

It seemed that they had a certain order in these ghastly affairs. Count de Brille motioned for silence. He seemed strangely detached from his noisy companions as if he had succumbed to their desire for sadistic amusement, but was not part of it. His brain at the moment was as tortured as his misshapen legs. This seance, as they called it, cut deeply into the fibres of his twisted make-up. He looked at the cage, his eyes glowing like hot coals as they rested on Punch. This naked mass of a man, with his muscles rippling like finely tempered steel, had humiliated him in a test of strength. Revenge as bitter as gall had him in a grip of iron. The man should suffer and suffer. His vast strength would be sapped from his mighty shoulders until he was a whimpering thing grovelling at his feet begging mercy. But there was to be no mercy. Brille's sharp teeth sank into his lip, drawing blood. As the salty taste reached his tongue he drew out a white handkerchief with a flourishing gesture and wiped the blood away. He tapped on the wood for silence.

"Monsieur Bennett!"

Punch awarded the cripple a lazy glance of contempt.

"Are you going to fight with the other dogs?"

With a visible effort Brille managed to hold his consuming hate in check.

"These are the terms of the encounter," he said evenly, like an announcer at a prize fight. "There are five hounds. Caesar, the tallest has never lost a fight. Napoleon, his brother, has a similar record, but is not as quick as the bigger dog. The others are fine fighting animals. First, you will fight Napoleon. If you win, you will fight three dogs at once, but not Caesar. Whatever the outcome, you will be given to Caesar at the end, with the boy." A harsh note of hate entered the even voice. "Caesar will tear the flesh from your bones, dead or alive!"

Punch said nothing at first. One could neither taunt the man nor reason with his warped brain. One, then three, then one again; that was a break when he had expected all five at once. The whole business seemed bizarre, incredible, in this warring England of 1943; the garish lights shining on this ancient stonework, the poor devil with the noose round his neck, watching the descending water with horrible fascination, the two of them, naked and unafraid, about to fight for their very lives like two animals of the jungle, the row of grinning apes with the blood-lust in their staring eyes, and the snarl of the great dogs separated from the cage by a gate. It seemed impossible.

"Only three rounds, m'lud," he said to Smithy.

"Yes, boss," said Smithy nervously. He was doing his utmost to keep his end up.

Punch walked to the front of the cage.

"What happens when we've disposed of the dogs?"

A yell of derision like the clatter of so many monkeys came from the young men.

"I'm speaking to the hyena in the

middle," said Punch, "not to you palsied rats."

"That is impossible," Brille said in an effort to keep his lacerated temper in check.

Punch's level gaze fell on the man, to his discomfiture.

"Where's the trick?" he asked harshly.

"Trick?" Count de Brille raised a supercilious eyebrow. "The fight with the dogs will proceed as I have announced. You have that on the honour of Count Raoul de Merency de Brille."

"Honour?" cried Punch. "My sacred aunt! See here, Brille, you misshapen little monstrosity, what happens when I've killed your puppies?"

Brille smiled slowly.

"I had not thought of that; you see, it won't happen." He turned to Chateaucneuf and had a lengthy conversation, evidently drawing on the older man's experience of bestiality, which was all to the good from Punch's point of view, as time was the only commodity he could gain at the moment. He knew these men had no intention of letting him leave the place alive, and his one hope of a rescue lay in Sexton Blake. The count finished his conference and announced his decision. "Our two manservants will then fight you with their steel rods."

"Regular hippodrome!" grinned Punch. "After I have banged their skulls together—what then?"

Count de Brille became irritable.

"Hang you! Shoot you! Throw you into the moat with a weight on your feet! I haven't decided."

"The honour of Count de Filth," said Punch softly. "All right; bring in your puppies."

Brille turned to his friends.

"Gentlemen, you may now place your bets."

There was a shrill delight among the wine-flushed men in the cushioned chairs. Notebooks came out and they freely made wagers on the outcome,

writing down the particulars industriously.

Punch, laughing derisively through it all, not a nerve out of place, mocked them with great gusto.

"Two to one against Cæsar! Ten to one against the field! Try the old firm! Smithy, m'lad, did you ever see such apologies for men?" He lowered his voice. "Keep well behind me when the first one comes out, and keep your eyes glued on those merchants working the trap. They'll cheat if they get half a chance."

"O.K., boss!" Smithy was now behaving like the little hero he was.

From Jules, who found his rope beginning to tighten, came a howl of despair and a shrill offer to bargain in connection with the diamonds. Brille looked up quickly at the mention of diamonds. He called to one of the menservants.

"Gag the fellow!"

The servant, no better than his masters, crossed to the heavy raft and brought the rope tight with his weight while he roughly gagged Jules. For some reason best known to himself, possibly to prolong the man's agony, Brille shot his chair across to the rope, which was secured to a cleat, and gave the man six inches more play before tying it again.

The servant returned to his perch above the cage and a snarling set-up started as he and his fellow commenced to separate the dogs. Punch was on the balls of his feet like a prize-fighter.

The sliding-door went up with a rush, and a great hound, slaving and fighting mad, came through with an enormous bound. His speed was simply terrific as he eyed his prey and circled. The dogs had been better trained for this fiendish work than Punch had expected.

The dog was on all-fours now, stiff-legged, wary. From the chairs came a bedlam of encouragement. De Brille's eyes were gleaming like pin-points.

Punch was in a low crouch, Smithy behind him trying to watch the hound and keep his eyes on the men at the trapdoor at the same time. There was a swift padding for a moment. Like lightning the dog came in from a belly-crouch, slashing with wide-open mouth. Punch side-stepped and caught the dog behind the ear with the flat of his hand, causing it to lose balance. Dead silence reigned in the room, the men watching as though their own living depended on the outcome. The hound, bested once, became more wary. He circled slowly, stiff proud feet coming noiselessly down, tingling for a spring with fangs ready to lay back a foot of flesh from his opponent's arm or leg. Punch, contrary to Smithy's expectations, circled against the hound, shortening the distance between them every second, until the dog leaped aside with a low snarl of discomfort. The man's eyes held the hound's. The dog seemed to know that this was a fight with an adversary unafraid. Punch's footwork was perfect.

All the time as they measured each other Punch found time to give Smithy directions, left, right, forwards or backwards, so that in avoiding an onrush from the hound the brute would not land on the boy.

Foiled in his first attempt at a spring with the full weight of his body behind it, the dog commenced some speedy in and out fighting, and earned a sharp upper-cut which jarred him into insensate rage. This was evidently what Punch wanted. The hunter became the hunted. Roaring taunts came from Punch as he moved in on the beast.

But the dog was a thoroughbred even if trained to this foul work. Punch, thinking quickly, shot out a foot and the animal turned a half-somersault to avoid it. He knew at once that the hound had been trained by a Frenchman where the kick is of first importance. He changed his tactics. Animal-like, the dog kept his eyes on the vital spot, the heavy neck which

Punch had been keeping covered with his chin. Once the dog's teeth sank into the column of his neck it would be finish. But, greatly daring, Punch made a feint, lifting his chin.

"Left, Smithy!"

The dog came in, hair bristling, like a missile from a catapult. Punch side-stepped quicker than the dog could weave, and the animal speedily learned that here was one man-animal who did not fight in the approved French method. Punch connected with a hay-maker behind the ear which hurled the beast half across the cage. And now it was his turn to come in with terrific speed. He threw his buttocks across the animal's front legs with a jar which almost collapsed the lungs and literally tore the throat out of the beast with his naked hands, his gorge rising at the gory mess. Then came the "honour" of Count de Brille.

All that saved the two of them at the moment was some bungling on the part of the men trying to keep the savage Caesar away from the three dogs they were trying to admit to the cage.

By some contriving, best known to the men on the top of the gate, the three hounds leaped into the cage at once.

There was a quick indrawn whistle of sharply drawn breath, as if every nerve was taut with horrible anticipation.

Punch knew on the instant that he could not fight three such dogs with his naked hands and win. Also in the back of his mind, insistent and clamorous, he knew that his tactics must be so arranged as to protect young Smithy, who would not have a chance against these powerful animals.

"In the corner, Smithy!"

Before the new arrivals could streak in for a killing attack Punch had grasped the dead hound by the hind legs and swung it round his head. For a second the dogs cowered against the far end of the cage, terrified and whimpering.

There was a gasp of horror from some of the men in the room, and perhaps one or two of them felt some slight pangs of conscience and admiration as they saw this stark courage unleashed.

"Mon Dieu, he's a man!" one of them cried involuntarily.

And now commenced a savage business which brought the perspiration into great beads on Punch's body. It rolled in rivulets all down his naked torso. His face was set and savage, his whole being reduced to primitive things. Like a tornado of wrath he swept into the attack. The dogs, uncertain as the smell of blood assailed their nostrils, paced quickly backwards and forwards, restless and whimpering.

"Mother of mercy, I can do it!" cried Punch in a great voice as he saw those first signs of cowering before this strange weapon. "I'm going to smash them into the corner, Smithy. Watch yourself!"

"Go to it, boss!"

The carcass whirled over Punch's great shoulders and drove the animals before him. A shrewd blow and one was down. Smithy, unafraid now, licked in and fastened his fingers on the animal's throat, squeezing with all his strength.

"Rods!" screamed De Brille, frothing like a madman in his annoyance.

The men above pricked the two remaining animals sharply.

"Look out, Smithy!"

Punch, occupied with one animal, saw one of the great creatures streak past his eyes. The lad looked up to see a fearful vision of fangs and wild eyes coming at him in full spring. He had little or no chance, but the boy had learned his footwork in the London streets. He was away like a terrier, and like that same game little animal he shot forward as the hound went by, threshing and weaving as he missed his target, and grabbed him by the neck. The hound bore forward, twice Smithy's strength and weight, and smashed him

to the floor a weaving, whirling mass with the lad hanging on like grim death. Punch, in sudden dismay, fought like a fiend. Regardless of danger he leaped like an animal full at the other two hounds, smashing them to the ground with his fists. Before they could get to their feet he had opened up his great shoulders and smashed the heads of the two dogs together like a couple of coconuts. He could not wait a second to see if they were dead.

The small audience, their eyes starting from their heads, were on their feet yelling like madmen. From beyond the gate to the cage the mighty Caesar, mad with excitement, was racing round snarling and throwing his head back, making the place hideous with his screaming battle cry.

Smithy, hanging grimly to the hound's neck, wriggled like an eel to keep out of the way of those slashing feet. A great weal from one of the hind feet was already welling with blood.

To save the boy's life Punch had to cool his hot blood. He knew what he had to do, but how to do it. Both of the combatants were thrashing on the floor like two great springs released from a cylinder. An opening came and Punch bore in at great speed. His feet came crashing down on the hound's back and his hands darted to the two hind legs.

"Hang on, Smithy!"

A sudden grunting exertion of strength, and Punch, his feet firmly on the hound's spine, brought the hind quarters arching upwards. The dog screamed like a human being, but he had no answer to that fiendish hold. His spine arched like a drawn bow and snapped under the strain. Punch cast a glance at the other two hounds, and saw they were jerking feebly in their death throes.

He had to pull Smithy's fingers from the neck of the dead hound. The boy

was as white as a sheet but still game as a terrier.

"Thanks, Smithy boy!" said Punch, and put his arm round the boy's wet body. "Let's have a look at your back."

The hurt needed attention, but did not look dangerous.

"You'll do," he grunted. "Dashed plucky! Plucky no end!"

He picked Smithy up in his arms and strode to the front of the cage. His eyes streamed the scorn of a brave man for a bunch of puling cowards. At the moment the little rats were quarrelling over their bets. Punch addressed De Brille.

"Let the boy out of here, you swine! I'll take on your blasted Caesar alone!"

Unmoved, Brille turned his thumb down. Whatever amazement may have been in his mind he was pinning his hopes on the yet unvanquished Caesar.

From Punch's writhing lips came such a stream of abuse that even Smithy, used to the language of the docks, looked up in sheer amazement.

"Blimy, boss, I didn't know you had such a flow!"

Punch grinned, the old lovable grin which always restored Smithy's complete confidence in the midst of utter danger. Caesar, in the boy's estimation, did not have a chance.

"Massage Caesar first!" ordered Brille of his servants.

Punch had a respite. He sat in the corner with Smithy, sucking his wound because he was afraid of infection.

"Just stay in the corner next time, m'lud. Can't have this sort of thing happen again."

"I'll be all right, boss. Sorry I made such a mess of it."

"Mess!" cried Punch. "There isn't another boy in London with your pluck."

Smithy smiled in spite of his hurts.

"D'yer mean that, boss?"

"Shut up, you young fathead."

growled Punch. "D'you want me to kiss you?"

Punch knew that this was a fight to the death. His idea that Blake would get there in time was nothing more than an idea to bolster up the boy. But he was resolved to die by a bullet if he had to, not by having a dog tear him to pieces. By thunder, if he could only come out on top he would remember this fight to his dying day.

The dead dogs were smartly hooked out of the cage by the two keepers, and Punch knew it was again a case of his naked hands. His strength was not quite what it was, the fearful business had been tiring even to his great muscles. And now he had to fight their champion killer.

Caesar was a magnificent beast, trained to the last hair. Despite the howling which had been coming from him for the past half-hour he was not inclined to be rash. Slowly he circled, great shoulders hunched forward, head down, his hair bristling forward from his back like a stiff mane. His feet came down one at a time, slowly, with great care, sensitive as an eyeball, ready on the instant to move at lightning speed. Punch, too, was straining in a crouch, his clenched fists slightly forward, his eyes holding the hound's in steady, watchful gaze.

For three full minutes nothing happened, just this slow sizing up of the situation, the dog no more ready to underestimate his adversary than the men. Smithy, a pace behind Punch, was as wary as the other two.

One of the men poked his long rod through the bars, and Brille screamed at him. The rod was hastily withdrawn.

The atmosphere was tense almost to the snapping point. Nobody had a thought for the wretched Jules, his rope tightening round his neck with every passing second.

Caesar was the first to move. He made quick lightning feints, coming on one occasion within a foot of Punch's

fists, but always ready with a terrific twist to draw back. Punch, for his part, tried the same tactics, darting forward and moving quickly aside, Smithy following each move with dexterity. The dog backed to the wall of the cage, and then streaked across the floor in a wild leap almost too quick for the eyes to follow.

"How's your luck, Smithy?" asked Punch, keeping his eyes glued on the dog.

"O.K., boss!"

"Move to the left and stand still. The dog will spring at you and I'll take him on the fly. Got it?"

"O.K., boss!"

"Wait till I say."

The dog was now at the far end of the cage. Punch moved towards the front leaving the full width of the cage on his left-hand side, the dog watching every movement intelligently.

"Ready?" whispered Punch.

"Yes."

"Now!" he cried in a great voice, hoping to disconcert the hound.

Smithy darted to the left and stood stock-still. The dog, startled by the roar of sound and finding his opponent had become two, did exactly what Punch had anticipated. His leap at Smithy came from a full crouch, a hairy streak of long, lithe body and glistening cruel fangs. The boy stood his ground like a hero, ready to sidestep if necessary. But Punch's aim seemed to be true. Hurling his fifteen-stone forward at right-angles to the dog he met the beast full on, his hands sinking with a grunt into the flesh of the hairy neck. Both went down with a crash, Punch jerking his body to fall prone on the animal's chest and belly to avoid the murderous legs.

"He's got him too low!" came the high-pitched voice of the assistant high priest of this horrible orgy, Henri de Chateaufort.

"Too low!" the others screamed. "Too low!"

And Punch knew, too, that he did

not have the death-hold, his grip was in the muscles of the upper chest. He knew, too, that he dared not move that grip to the windpipe and hope to live. All he could do at the moment was spread his legs wide to anchor the beast and hold on like grim death to keep those slashing fangs away from his head.

The animal knew what Punch knew. Almost human in his intelligence, he relaxed affably, probably hoping that Punch would relax his grip to slip along the sinewy neck to shut off his life-breath. But the man made no move, knowing how trigger-quick the hound was.

Smithy was held in the throes of a terrible indecision. He was afraid to add his fingers to the sinewy throat of the animal as some sixth sense warned him that the slightest bungling would cause disaster and a cruel death, and he was afraid to stand idly by. Finally, he got to his belly and crawled along the floor towards the hound's head, his thumbs extended, steeling himself to jab them in the eyes of the beast, but was warned off by Punch, who knew that he could exert no more strength, and a sudden paroxysm of pain would lend an uncontrollable strength to his antagonist. Punch's muscles stood out like whipcord, his back arched to a steely bow, but he could not make the slightest gain.

A hush had descended on the room. In his excitement Brille shot his chair forward to the bars of the cage, the others joining him, eyes staring, their breath coming and going in quick gasps as the battle of the giants went remorselessly forward.

Slowly and certainly the truth smote at Punch. He was at the very zenith of his strength, and it was not good enough. The animal was lying there like a statue, holding himself in reserve, knowing in his fighting heart that the man-animal could not get the death grip. In that fraction of time

required for Punch to slip his hand along another two inches the beast seemed to know it would have the strength to break free. The sweat was now pouring off Punch's body in a steady stream. Human endurance was at the breaking-point. Smithy ran around half demented by the knowledge that he could not help. He knew from that warning glance from Punch that he must not touch the animal.

The moment came when Punch knew his strength was on the wane. In a few minutes his grip would be shaken, and he was in no shape to fight the beast, who had simply lain there holding all his steely strength in reserve. Once he let go the tables would be reversed.

One question now throbbed in Punch's head. Dare he make the plunge, take the gambler's chance by relaxing his hold to grab the death-grip? Only two inches. He gauged that short space like a marksman sighting his rifle for the King's Prize at Bisley. Could he be quick enough? Dared he? If he missed it was curtains for him and Smithy. Curtains, anyway, he thought grimly as he shot a scornful glance at Brille peering through the bars, his hot eyes barely a yard away. But to be torn to pieces by a dog? Better the steel rods or Brille's bullet.

Then he knew that the risk had to be taken. His muscles were crying out for a decision. He must take the chance.

"This is it!" he thought desperately.

Solidly, purposefully, he crammed his heavy body down against the bony structure of the hound's underside. The animal twisted uncertainly and whimpered for the first time. Its muscles tautened like steel bands. Almost the hound knew that this man-animal had decided to risk all on one throw. Its fighting heart was stout for action. The hound, poor brute,

could not know the vile nature of the fight in which it was engaged.

Smithy had thrown caution to the winds now. He sensed as much as he saw that Punch was at the end of his tether. Like a whirlwind he sprang in, slipped along the floor like an eel, and threw his arms round the upper jaw of the animal, pulling its head back almost flat with the floor. Punch, in the same instant, relaxed and grabbed at the extended throat like lightning.

But Caesar had fought that game many times before. Like a released spring he wriggled loose, sending Punch to the floor on top of Smithy. Both came to their feet with as much speed as the dog had shown.

And now the hound stood in the far corner a magnificent brute, eyes glaring like fire, his hair bristling almost at right angles from his body. A killer if ever there was one. From the auditorium came the shrill cries of the other beasts.

"Caesar! Kill! Kill! Caesar!"

"Sorry, Smithy boy," muttered Punch with a twisted smile.

Caesar, sure now of his prey, was as unhurried as a Jap about to speak the truth. He flexed his great muscles and took a turn or two up and down the end wall of the cage. It was a ruse. Almost from a sideways position he sprang.

Punch, gallant to the end, pushed Smithy behind him and stood like a stake driven into the ground. There was a dull thud as he took that snarling head smack against his chest. Then the spectators noticed that Punch had clasped his hands together over his head. They came down with a terrific force in a rabbit punch behind the animal's ears. He side-stepped, with the ease of a practised boxer.

The animal, disconcerted, darted back to its corner, and Punch did not have the strength to follow up his advantage. There now began a business of savage rushes, so bewilderingly

quick that the eye could hardly follow the movements of the maddened animal. Had Punch been alone he might have wearied the beast by his clever footwork, but always he must think of Smithy. Wearying fast, the animal now walked to the end of the cage in lordly disdain. This time he would finish it with a spring.

"The kill! Caesar, the kill!"

The cries came up from the front of the cage like screams from a madhouse.

Not a soul in that room saw a tall stern figure with raised revolver determined to take the most dreadful chance a marksman had ever been called upon to face.

The dog had given up his idea of a spring and had again resorted to his whirlwind tactics to wear his opponent down. Inside the cage was a whirlwind of movement.

Sexton Blake, more stern than ever, brought his left hand up to steady his aim. Just as the animal, its fangs bared, darted in to get that final hold on Punch's neck the pistol barked and the animal fell sideways, twitching in its death-throes. Punch took a couple of stumbling steps forward, tottered and almost collapsed as he grabbed the bars of the cage.

"Good old sleuth!" he managed to grin. Then he grabbed the bars to prevent himself from falling; out on his feet.

Seldom had Tinker seen the great detective's anger at such white heat. Sexton Blake's keen features were writhing with disgust.

"Stand in your places, you scum of the earth!" he cried in a great voice.

The men who had staged this ghastly affair turned round in shivering dismay to confront this stern-voiced man who had arrived so unexpectedly. Immediately, with one voice, they started to whimper, denying responsibility. Cowards all!

One of the servants, on the roof of the cage, thinking he was unobserved,

aimed his steel rod full at Punch's back. Immediately, he fell back with a scream of pain, his hand smashed. The rod clattered to the floor of the cage. Sexton Blake had shot from the hip.

"I said not a man is to move!"

Slowly the great detective came forward, scorn and horror in every line of his face.

Brille, cruel and cunning to the last, waited in seeming surrender. At the last minute he plucked a revolver from under the rug which covered his misshapen limbs and aimed it at Punch. But he had not reckoned with the alert Tinker. That young man simply kicked his chair over and spilled the little brute on the floor. The bullet from his gun entered the breast of Count Bazon, ending that misspent life on the spot.

But they were not yet finished with Count de Brille's capacity for evil. Like the animal he was he went padding along the floor on all fours, and at great speed. Slaving like an animal, his face working like a demon, he unhooked the rope which was to have sent Jules to his doom. The next second, startling even Sexton Blake, he had clutched the wretched man in his arms and streaked through an open doorway.

"Stop him!" cried Blake to Tinker, but the door clanged shut too quickly and they heard a bolt shoot into place.

Blake turned to Chateaufneuf, addressing him like a dog.

"You! Where does that lead to?"

"The roof, my dear."

"Bah!" cried Blake, and turned on his heel, calling to Tinker to guard the prisoners.

Well acquainted with the architecture of castles like this, Sexton Blake went into the courtyard at once and darted up the outside staircase, coming out on the roof shortly after Brille and his servant.

On the roof he discovered a scene

going forward like some grotesque imagining of Dumas. Brille was astride the parapet fiercely questioning his servant, who was held in an iron grip. The fiend did not seem to understand that the poor devil was gagged and could not answer. Each time Jules made some sign with his head Brille clawed at him with long, tearing fingers, bleeding the man like an animal in the paws of a jungle cat. Blake could think of nothing else.

There was nothing else to be done with men in such a precarious position. If Jules was to be saved—for the hangman, thought Blake grimly—he would have to shoot Brille out of hand.

But the madman was not to go the easy way of a bullet. Somehow or other Jules had got some leverage on the roof with his foot. In the midst of a savage onslaught, too painful to leave him in possession of his senses, he destroyed his captor's balance and the two men went hurtling to their doom. Sexton Blake darted forward as a wild cry of anguish split the air. Their falling bodies had struck a jagged abutment of the wall and sent them ricocheting into the deep waters of the moat. There was a splash, a few bubbles, and the waters closed over them for ever.

Blake turned away, utterly sickened.

CHAPTER 18.

The Diamonds.

IT was not one of Punch's best shows. He speedily recovered from his terrible ordeal. Inspector Ed. Miller arrived with a squad of men, and all the inhabitants of the castle were placed under arrest. A policeman was placed on the door and they were permitted to go to their rooms to change from evening dress into their ordinary clothes. In Chateaufneuf's dressing-room Punch and Smithy were industriously availing themselves of a large

wardrobe in which they found some suitings and underwear quite in keeping with the former's fastidious taste.

In the act of dressing they saw Chateaufneuf come stealthily into the room. A stealthy man was Punch's meat and drink. He cautioned Smithy to silence and watched.

Chateaufneuf took a chair and mounted it, counting carefully along the stones in an upper tier.

"The old swine's looking for the bank roll," Punch whispered to Smithy. "We'll be rich yet."

To his amazement Punch watched the man remove one of the stones, take out a package and replace the stone.

"My sacred aunt, the diamonds as I live and breathe," whispered Punch in great excitement. "No time like the present," he grinned and started forward.

Many a time Punch had said with a grin that Sexton Blake was sometimes too opportune. This was one of those times. The great detective stood in the doorway, an enigmatical smile on his lips.

"You can give me those diamonds, Chateaufneuf!"

"Certainly, my dear," said the stupid Frenchman and handed over the package.

"Bah!" exclaimed Blake, and turned to Punch with a smile. "Just in time it seems."

For once Punch was discomfited.

"By Jove!" was all he could say. He had already thanked Blake profusely for saving his life. "Dashed if you aren't the most inopportune bloke at times. Yknow, I was just going to take them myself—er—to hand over to the authorities."

"Amazing," smiled Blake.

Punch looked at him almost with awe.

"How do you do it, old sleuth? I figured Brille for the sparklers."

"Oh, I knew Chateaufneuf had the diamonds," smiled Blake.

"You see, I had decided that Jules got the stones because he had a hold over Brille for some shocking business in Paris. When Brille took him from that scaffold Jules gave an imploring look to Chateaufneuf. I knew then that Jules had lodged the stones with Chateaufneuf for safe keeping, possibly having a similar hold on this man."

"Certainly not, my dear," piped Chateaufneuf.

Sexton Blake smothered the apology for a man with such a fierce look that Punch laughed.

"Bah!" exclaimed Blake again, and turned on his heel.

Immediately the door closed Punch bundled Chateaufneuf into the dressing-room. He then leaped to the chair and removed the stone again. Reaching into the cavity his hand came out with one of those small parchment envelopes used by diamond dealers. He spilled into his hand about twenty large diamonds of the finest water, blazing with light.

"And that, Smithy," observed Punch, "is a mighty fine insight into the mind of a thief. I knew the palsied old misfit would leave a few behind in case of accidents."

"Not arf," said Smithy, once more his usual self.

"The only trouble," moaned Punch, "is that I do not have the heart to gloat over old Sexton after what he did for us to-day."

But, some days later, after the Frenchmen had been sent up for trial, Sexton Blake received at Baker Street a registered package. Opening it he found a case containing a diamond stickpin mounting the finest diamond he had ever seen in such an ornament. In the case was a card bearing the words "Thanks, old sleuth—Punch."

The great detective sat back in his chair and laughed heartily. He did not need to draw on his great logical faculties to realise what had happened.

THE CRIME OF THE EMPTY SHRIMPER

By MARTIN FRASER.

CHAPTER 1. Out of the Fog.

THE fog came creeping in from the Channel and settled down, clammy and stifling, on the countryside. It drifted over the fields in whirling wreaths and seemed to thicken in the hollows and along the road that ran between the hills.

Sexton Blake sat crouched over the wheel of his big car, trying to peer through the windscreen. Beside him sat Tinker, shaking his head despairingly.

"We've lost him, guv'nor!" he said tersely.

"I'm afraid we have," Blake admitted; "but I dare not travel faster in this sea mist."

"So that's what you call it, eh?" retorted Tinker. "To me it's just a fog—and a nasty one at that."

"It's a sea mist. They often come in from the sea in the early evening."

"Meanwhile, old Shenson has got away from us."

"The luck was with him," said Blake calmly. "He did not know he was being tailed. I feel sure about that."

"All the same, it's tough luck, guv'nor," observed Tinker. "It's quite likely that his weekly motoring trips down this way have quite a lot to do with the excess of bullion on the market. We decide to see where he

goes and this dratted fog has to start its creeping!"

They had left London about midday. So had Maurice Shenson, the Hatton Garden bullion broker. They had followed Shenson all this way—almost to the Sussex coast—and then had lost him.

The sudden appearance on the bullion market of more gold than there should have been was something that puzzled the people at Westminster, and Sexton Blake—and Scotland Yard, too, for that matter—had been asked to look into the strange business.

Sexton Blake had been busy around Hatton Garden, but the only suspicious thing he found was that Maurice Shenson motored once a week, southward, towards the coast. No one knew where he went nor why he went. But it was clear that he was prospering exceedingly and his bank balance was growing.

Maybe Sexton Blake would have discovered something that morning if the fog had not intervened.

"Well, we can't expect the luck always to be with us," he said. And suddenly he clapped on the brakes. The big car came to a standstill with a squealing of locked wheels.

"Go easy, guv'nor," said Tinker. "You nearly smashed my nose on the windscreen."

But Blake wasn't listening. He sat at the wheel, thoughtfully stroking his chin.

"Now, which way did he go, I wonder?" he queried.

Tinker saw, then, that they had come to a fork in the road. The main road obviously bore off to the left. A secondary road curved to the right and was lost to view behind a spinney.

Blake got out of the car and studied the tracks in the road. But much traffic had passed that way before them—market lorries, army lorries, a bus or two. The road seemed scored with dozens of tyre tracks, and any one of them might have been Shenson's.

"We'll take the main road," decided Blake. "A private car went that way not so long ago. We'll chance it."

So he drove on again at a speed that was by no means fast, yet reckless considering the swirling fog. The road twisted and turned, went up hill and down dale. There was a salt tang in the air now.

"We ought to reach the coast very soon, by the smell of it," said Tinker. "Phew! Whelks for dinner, guv'nor."

"Cranport," said Blake. "A little fishing hamlet."

The fog was lifting now as the sun struggled to show. Blake drove carefully down the hill into the little town that nestled in the bay between the cliffs. He pulled up outside the one and only hostelry, right on the quays.

A group of fisherfolk were gathered there, gazing out to sea. The fog was lifting away inland. The sun was shining, setting every wave sparkling. And far out was a tiny boat—little more than a largish rowing-boat with a mast stepped.

"She's driftin', I tell ye!" growled a burly fisherman. "The tide 'ud take her that way, natcherally, so it would!"

"Ye're right enow, Ben," replied another big man, wiping his mouth on the back of his gnarled hand. "She's drifting. Ther' ain't a soul aboard her.

And if it ain't Dave Gedge's Girl Sue I'll eat me hat!"

"Let her off, Jim!" ordered Ben.

Jim strolled away towards a large boat-house, outside which stood a small iron cannon. Tinker didn't notice what the man did, but he jumped a foot in the air when the cannon exploded with a booming roar.

"Gosh, we're invaded!" he gasped.

"Easy," laughed Blake. "They're summoning the lifeboat crew." He turned to Ben, obviously the coxswain of the lifeboat. "Have you enough men now to man the lifeboat?" he asked.

"No, sir, that we ain't—what wi' so many in the Navy and away wi' the Mercantile Marine."

"That's fine!" breathed Tinker excitedly. "Here are two extra hands for you. Might as well make ourselves useful, now we are here."

The lifeboat was run down the slipway. There certainly were not enough men there to man her. Blake and Tinker scrambled aboard amongst the burly fishermen.

"We want one more!" roared Ben. "Any offers?"

"Here!" boomed a familiar voice, as a thick-set man, with a bowler hat wedged firmly on his head, came running down the slipway.

"Couttsy!" chuckled Tinker. "Bring a bucket, Couttsy, old chap. You'll need it!"

Detective-Inspector Coutts of the C.I.D. clambered aboard the lifeboat. When he saw Sexton Blake and Tinker seated there his eyes almost started from his head. "What the heck are you two doing here?" he demanded.

"Just lending a hand, Coutts, the same as you," smiled Blake.

Coutts was suspicious.

"I heard you were on that bullion affair," he said. "I'm on it, too. And we meet here, in Cranport. What brought you down this way?"

"We can talk about that after," returned Blake.

"That's all very well," growled Coutts. "But I struck a good lead and I don't want you butting in and spoiling it for me."

Blake's eyebrows flickered slightly.

"We've worked together before," he said, "and we can do the same again, Coutts."

The inspector sniffed scornfully, and said no more. Many a time he had worked with Sexton Blake, and if the cases had been brought to a successful conclusion, and he got the credit for them, he knew who was really responsible. Maybe he was a trifle jealous of Blake's skill and deductive ability, but he realised that it wasn't policy to object to the presence of the famous detective in Cranport.

In any case, there was little chance to say any more. The lifeboat was afloat and the great sweeps were out. Cranport, being only a tiny place, could not boast a motor lifeboat. They had to pull the great craft out over the sunny sea. There was no danger in it at all, which disappointed Tinker.

"There's no thrill in this!" he muttered. "Only hard work!"

But there was a heavy ground swell running, and happening to glance round at Coutts he saw that the inspector was looking very tense and a trifle green round the gills.

"Swallow, Couttsy," he said with a chuckle. "That sometimes stops it!"

Coutts growled something he did not catch. Maybe it was better he didn't hear the actual words. They were not complimentary.

And then, Ben, standing in the stern, roared orders. The lifeboat slewed round and the starboard oars were raised as she ran alongside the shrimp.

Sexton Blake was the first man to drop into her. It looked as if she had been abandoned, but why was a mystery.

"One o' they Nazi planes, I'll be bound!" growled a fisherman. "Look,

mister. Ain't that blood on the thwart, for'ard, there?"

Blake moved forward to the bows of the boat, stooped over a sinister dark stain on the thwart, raised his head and nodded.

"Blood, right enough," he said.

Then he was fingering the thwart farther along. It was neatly grooved—and recently, for the wood in the groove showed up a gleaming white in contrast to the grime and dirt elsewhere.

"Aye, a bullet, surely," said Ben, leaning over the side of the lifeboat. "Gunned by a Nazi, they were. Reckon that's the end o' Dave Gedge and Harry Stiles."

But Blake was moving about the boat, noting everything there was to see. The shrimp trawl was neatly stowed and did not appear to have been used that trip. The auxiliary motor was not running. There was plenty of petrol in the tank and a spare full tin under the sternsheets. The motor was switched off. The sail was neatly stowed in the booms.

"Well," said Coutts with heavy sarcasm, "d'you think you'll find the name o' the Nazi pilot if you look long enough, Blake?"

Blake just smiled as he deftly caught a rope tossed from the lifeboat. He said nothing, but made the rope fast.

"Give way, lads!" roared Ben. And the lifeboat towed the empty shrimp into Cranport Harbour. It seemed to be just another war-time tragedy of the sea, but there was a tense look on Sexton Blake's face that was not lost on Tinker.

"Those Nazis have a lot to answer for!" growled Coutts, as he clambered ashore from the lifeboat.

"Undoubtedly," replied Blake, "but this is not one of them."

Coutts gaped at him.

"What d'you mean?" he asked. "It's obviously a case of enemy action. What else could it be?"

"Murder!" retorted Blake.

"By the Nazis!" added Coutts.

Blake made no reply, merely contenting himself with shrugging his shoulders, turning aside to talk to the coxswain of the lifeboat.

CHAPTER 2.

The Suitcase.

COUTTS had known Blake long enough to realise that he never made a statement unless he could back it up with concrete facts. If Blake said that the affair of the shrimping boat was a case of murder it was rash to ignore it. Yet Coutts was frankly puzzled.

All the fishermen, who knew more about nautical matters than Coutts had ever heard of, were unanimously of the opinion that Dave Gedge had been caught by a marauding Nazi plane and shot up. It had happened before along the coast and would, no doubt, happen again before the end of the war.

Coutts racked his brains, trying to discover what had aroused Blake's suspicions. He even went to stand on the edge of the quay to gaze down into the boat, hoping to see something he had formerly missed. But it was all in vain.

Suddenly turning, he saw that Blake and Tinker were walking away towards the town. He hastened after them.

"Hey!" he called. "Where are you off to now?"

Blake smiled over his shoulder.

"Going to break the sad news to the widows," he said. "Although I expect they have already heard."

Coutts scowled suspiciously.

"You mean going to find out all you can about the lost fishermen."

Blake neither admitted nor denied the accusation.

"There were two in the boat," he said casually. "The owner and skipper was a man named David Gedge. He lived in that stone cottage at the end of the row. His wife is still there hear-

ing the news. See the women at the gate?"

Coutts fell into step beside Blake.

"Are you sure it was murder?" he asked, in as near a whisper as he could manage.

"We'd better not discuss it now," returned Blake. There were too many people about.

They thrust their way through the throng of maudlin women to the cottage door. It was easy enough to pick out the widow of David Gedge. She was seated on a chair in the living-room, a handkerchief in her hand, a look of unutterable sorrow on her face.

"Get these people out of here," said Blake.

Coutts bridled at once. He was more accustomed to giving orders than taking them. But there was something strangely tense about Blake, which meant that he was on the verge of a discovery that might be of vital importance.

So the Yard man bustled about with an air of great importance.

"We are police officers—routine inquiries," he kept saying. "If you don't mind, ma'am. Outside, please."

Blake stood there eyeing Mrs. Gedge. He noticed her handkerchief. It was perfectly dry. Not that that was anything of conclusive significance. Some people, on receiving such stunning news, might be too shocked even to cry.

But for all the sorrow on the woman's face there was a strange light in her eyes that belied her sorrow. She was alert—on her guard—bracing herself for an ordeal.

"Mrs. Gedge," said Blake in kindly tones. "We are sorry to intrude at such a terrible time, but we must make certain inquiries. We will not worry you more than is absolutely necessary."

She buried her face in her handkerchief—or as much of her face as can be buried in a woman's handkerchief. She bowed her head, and her shoulders heaved convulsively.

But when she looked up the handkerchief was still dry. ▶

Blake moved over to the mantelpiece and picked up a photograph of a hard-faced, stalwart sea-faring man—weather-beaten, with a drooping moustache.

"Your husband?" he asked gently.

Mrs. Gedge nodded.

"Yes, sir," she said thickly. "And no woman had a better. And now—now—he's gone!"

"War is a tragic thing," observed Blake, setting the photograph back on the mantelpiece. There was not a trace of emotion on his face—no hint that he had seen anything unusual. Yet the wad of pound notes behind the old-fashioned marble clock certainly was unusual in a fisherman's cottage. By the size of it he judged there must be at least a hundred pounds there!

"Mr. Gedge owned his boat, I believe," he observed.

"That he did, sir. Took him nigh on ten years to scrape the money together."

"Has he done well since then?"

"Done well?" cried Mrs. Gedge indignantly. "When did fisherfolk do well? When fish is scarce prices run high, but along of fish being scarce he can't catch 'em. When fish is plentiful, then prices is that low it hardly pays to leave harbour."

"But war-time prices must help the fishermen?"

Mrs. Gedge shook her head.

"Don't you believe it," sir," she said. "It ain't us what gets those high prices. It's the land-sharks what sells the fish as gets the high prices. You ax anybody around here. They'll tell you."

Blake paced the room, his head drooped forward as if thinking intently.

"And, what do you intend to do, Mrs. Gedge?" he asked.

She scowled at his back.

"How should I know?" she cried.

"You haven't given me much time, have you?"

"No, I suppose we haven't," replied Blake. "Well, I don't think we need bother you any more, Mrs. Gedge."

The woman bowed her head and dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief. Blake glanced at a corner of the room. He only looked that way for a split second, but Tinker was watching him closely. He, too, looked in that corner, and there, behind the armchair, was a suit-case, lying on the floor open, with all sorts of male and female garments neatly packed in it.

The next moment Blake was leaving the cottage with Tinker close beside him.

"Hang around here, Tinker," he said, so quietly that only Tinker heard him. "Keep an eye on her and see what she does and where she goes."

Coutts came bustling out of the cottage, hurrying after Blake.

"Going to see the other man's widow?" he asked scornfully. "I don't see that you got much out of that one."

"Which shows how wrong you are, Coutts," retorted Blake. "In any case, the other man—Harry Stiles, was not married. He lodged in the next street."

He led the way to Stiles' lodgings. Coutts gazed around.

"Where's Tinker?" he asked.

Blake smiled queerly.

"He'll turn up when he's wanted," he said.

"Now, look here, Blake," protested Coutts. "What's the idea of all this mystery? If it is murder you jolly well ought to let me in on it."

"You said it wasn't murder," argued Blake.

"What made you say it was," asked Coutts doggedly.

"I'll tell you later," replied Blake, turning in at a cottage gate. "This is where Stiles lives."

But the landlady was by no means sorrowful. She was a thin, waspish

little woman, bold-eyed and sharp of tongue.

"Well, I'm sorry enough for any man what gets gunned by them Nazis," she said. "But I ain't cryin' me eyes out for Harry Stiles."

"A bad lodger, eh?" suggested Blake.

"Yes—and no," she explained. "Never knew when he was coming in, nor whether he'd be half-canned, at that."

"Does he owe you anything?"

"Only this week's, and I ain't worryin' about that now. There was a time when I had to kick up a row afore he'd pay me. I can remember the time when he was a month behind wif his money. But that was a year ago. Been rolling in money, lately, but where he got it from beats me. Not out o' shrimpin', that I will swear!"

"Isn't there money in shrimping?"

"Not all that much," she replied. "Want to see his room? Not that you'll find anything there except his clothes. I've bin and looked already."

Coutt's eyebrows shot up and his eyes flashed.

"Well, you're honest about it, ma'am," he said, "but it isn't strictly legal to interfere with the personal effects of a deceased person without witnesses being present."

"Oh, I ain't pinched nothing!" declared the woman. "Nothing to pinch. Only five pounds in notes, and that's still there. I reckon he somehow got money easy and he spent it easy."

Blake nodded.

"Lots of men are like that," he said. "Thank you very much for your help." He strode away from the cottage.

"Where to now?" asked Coutts, rather bewildered.

"The Harbour Master's office," said Blake. "I want to study the tides and currents in Cranport Bay."

"What on earth for?" asked Coutts.

"Come and see," suggested Blake.

CHAPTER 3.

The Quarry.

TINKER had no idea what all the fuss was about. He had had too much experience of working with Sexton Blake to allow any preconceived notions of a case to take too firm a hold of him.

Like Coutts, it seemed pretty obvious that the mystery of the empty shrimper was simply a matter of enemy action. But it was also obvious that Sexton Blake did not think so, and that was good enough for Tinker.

If enemy action had to be ruled out, then the bloodstain and the groove on the thwart made by a bullet took on a sinister significance. And, in that case, to investigate the private lives of the two men involved was the natural thing to do.

Like Blake, he had been struck by the artificiality of Mrs. Gedge's grief. He, too, had noticed the dry handkerchief. And Blake had actually directed his gaze to the corner of the room where the half-packed suitcase was hidden behind the armchair.

Tinker sensed mystery. He had no means of solving it, but he had a job to do, and he did it with all the skill born of long experience.

He kept a watch on the cottage. It was not so easy as it sounded, for, unlike lots of town houses, even in suburbia, there was a way out at the back which was just as convenient for the dwellers there as the front door. In fact, in places like Cranport the back doors of the cottage were probably more frequently used than the front doors.

Tinker had to watch both the front and back of the cottage. He did it by scouting around casually and finding out just where the path that ran round the back of the house came out on the street. From that vantage point he could keep a check on both the front and the back of the cottage.

There was a shop close by, and he

gazed at the strange assortment of goods in the window as if intensely interested in a fly-blown dummy packet of chocolate. The window was as good as a mirror, and served his purpose excellently.

He waited there about half an hour. During that time several women called at the cottage, most of them weeping profusely, although the men who had so tragically put to sea and never returned had no connection with them, except as neighbours.

But these callers were not invited inside and received short shrift. They left the cottage rather bewildered and no longer weeping. They stood around in groups discussing the sad affair. Tinker would have liked to listen-in to their talk, but he could not leave his vantage point.

And then down the path that led from the back of the cottage, ran behind the row of cottages, and emerged on the street opposite the shop where Tinker stood, came Mrs. Gedge. She was dressed in her best. She was in a hurry, and she was furtive. She carried a suitcase that was obviously heavy.

She walked off up the road that led out of the town. It was growing dusk, and she kept well in the shadows all the time. Tinker set off on her trail. He was experienced in such work, and he felt quite sure that she had no idea she was being followed.

What puzzled Tinker was that the road she took did not lead to the one-horse railway station of Cranport, so she could not be going far. The road headed westward, running parallel with the coast-line. It climbed the hill over the downs that, on the left, became the craggy cliffs jutting out into the Channel. The deep rumble of the surf at the foot of those cliffs was a constant murmur in Tinker's ears.

Mrs. Gedge went on for a couple of miles, then turned down a lane on the left. It was unfrequented—little more than a cart-track. So far as Tinker

could see, there was no sign of any habitation in that direction. Sexton Blake's almost uncanny intuition seemed to be bearing fruit again. Here was mystery, right enough. For what could a newly made widow, with a packed suitcase, be wanting in such a place at such an hour?

Then, suddenly, Tinker went back under the hedge, for ahead of Mrs. Gedge he saw a man, standing by a gate. Was he waiting for the woman?

Tinker watched. He saw Mrs. Gedge go straight up to him and set down the suitcase with obvious relief. They were talking together. From time to time Tinker heard the man's chuckles of amusement.

They went back against the gate, and the overgrown, unkempt hedge hid them from view. Daringly, Tinker began to walk down the lane. He kept on the grassy verge beside the road and his feet made no sound at all. He had learned to move silently. It was one of the essential arts of his profession.

He moved slowly, adopting an air of idle loitering. He got near enough to hear what was being said. The man spoke in a thick, booming voice.

"Ye're sure they suspect nothin'?" he asked.

"O' course they never did!" said Mrs. Gedge. "I saw to that! I had it all cut and dried afore they came!"

"Good fr' you," chuckled the man.

He moved his head. Through a gap in the hedge Tinker got a view of his face. And at that moment the moon showed a ray of pale light to help him. It was a face he had seen before—weather-beaten, with a drooping moustache. It was the same face he had seen in the photograph on Mrs. Gedge's mantelpiece. The man was David Gedge, owner and skipper of the empty shrimper!

It was amazing! It was the last thing Tinker had expected. Once again Sexton Blake's deductive skill had been uncannily accurate.

Tinker moved yet nearer, realising that anything these two had to say would be of vital importance.

Mrs. Gedge was saying:

"It worked like a charm, Dave. But 'tis a pity it was the only way."

"Harry knew too much," growled Gedge. "He wanted too much, too! He had it coming to him, surely! But we can clear out—"

They began to move away, Gedge opening the gate. They passed through to what seemed to be a field. Tinker went after them. More than ever it was imperative to keep track of them both.

But by the time he reached the gate they had vanished completely. Tinker gazed around through the deepening dusk, wondering where they had gone. A twig snapped close behind him. Alarmed, he half turned. A heavy fist crashed against the back of his neck. He reeled forward, his senses reeling.

Somehow, he hardly knew how—he managed to save himself from falling. His assailant was coming after him. He dodged a vicious blow aimed at his head, and struck a shrewd blow himself. His fist crashed against the man's face. He heard a muttered curse—an angry voice shouting:

"Get him, Dave!"

Something—a heavy stick of some sort—thudded down on Tinker's head. He went reeling away sideways. The ground suddenly seemed to give way beneath his feet, and he felt himself falling into sheer space.

For an appreciable moment he fell, then crashed into the boughs of a tree. He had sense enough left in him to realise dimly that a tree growing out of the face of a cliff had broken his fall. But it was not stopping him.

The slashing twigs tore his clothes, his face and hands as he crashed through them. They deflected his fall, deflected him outwards away from the cliff.

Then he was dropping again through space. He seemed to somersault in

mid-air. He had a glimpse of water below him, with the brightening stars swinking in the rippling surface.

The next moment he struck the water. The impact winded him. He went down—down—fighting for life all the time. He broke surface again and lay still. He had been in desperate situations many times, and was wise enough not to lose his head. He had to steady his reeling senses. He had to recover his wind.

He floated there on his back. Gradually he began to make sense of what he could see—the stars above him, towering above.

But this was not the sea. He knew that. There were no waves—no rumbling, rhythmic beating of the surf against the rocks. He was in a pool in a hollow of the cliffs—in a quarry of some sort.

A man's head showed over the cliff-top, peering down at him. Tinker lay still. The pool was in dense shadow. Everything was still and silent. He heard a man's voice—a husky whisper that echoed in the quarry and reached his ears.

"He went slap in the pool, Dave. And there isn't anything moving there now! He won't talk."

The man's head was withdrawn. Tinker turned and swam to the shore of the pool. He was still groggy, but he crawled out and lay there panting.

He could not—dared not—attempt to climb those cliffs. In any case, Dave Gedge was up there, with that other man who had tried to murder him without compunction.

Before him he saw a gap in the surrounding cliffs. A small stream ran through from the pool. Tinker argued that it ran down to the beach and so to the sea. He followed it, and as the moon showed again he came out on the foreshore under the beetling cliffs.

And away among the rocks by the water's edge were two men, stooping

over something that lay there in the surf.

One of those figures he would recognise anywhere—under any conditions. It was Sexton Blake.

With a hoarse cry he broke into a run, calling:

"Guv'nor! Quickly! It was—was murder!"

Blake ran to meet him, and caught him in his arms as he collapsed.

CHAPTER 4.

The Little Boxes.

COUTTS sat in the Harbour Master's office listening to Sexton Blake discussing tides, currents, shoals and reefs with the Harbour Master. He had had no sort of nautical education and it sounded all Greek to him. He felt he was being led up the garden, and would have washed his hands of the whole affair had he not had a wholesome respect for Sexton Blake's intuitions and deductions.

"Then that settles it," declared Blake eventually. "If we search the shore by the Quarry Cove we ought to find something."

"You should—if your theories are correct," returned the Harbour Master. "But it looks like enemy action to me."

"And so it does to me," said Coutts angrily. "Look here, Blake, isn't it high time you put your cards on the table?"

Blake didn't appear to be listening. It was to the Harbour Master he spoke.

"Talking of enemy action," he said, "what ships have been sunk in these waters by enemy action?"

"Not many, as it happens," returned the official. "You see, we are off the main Channel routes. We don't get any steamers of any size close inshore here, except by chance. But one was sunk, twelve months ago, off shore —" He broke off. "That's queer!"

he exclaimed. "She lies in five fathoms off Quarry Cove."

"What boat was it?" asked Blake, and could hardly suppress the excitement in his voice.

"The Aldwych of London, bound for Boston in convoy. It was a stormy night and she lost the convoy. A U-boat got her, and there were no survivors. We only discovered what ship it was from the fragments of a life-boat washed up on the beach."

Blake was smiling at Coutts, who gaped in utter amazement.

"The Aldwych!" gasped Coutts. "Thunder, Blake! She was the vessel that carried half a million pounds of gold bullion! What have we struck!"

"What we came to find, Coutts," replied Blake. "The cases are linked—the mystery of the empty shrimper and the mystery of the excess of gold bullion on the market."

"But—that shrimper—enemy action —"

"No!" declared Blake. "Definitely no! There was only one bullet-mark on that shrimper, Coutts. And that was on a thwart, inside the boat. If a Nazi plane machine-guns a boat she sprays hundreds of bullets at it. Surely we should find the marks of more than one bullet—outside as well as inside the boat. But there was only one bullet-mark. Moreover, there was only one blood-stain, yet two men vanished. And again, the motor was not running, yet it had not run short of petrol. The sail was furled, so it had not been used. I suspect that craft was set adrift, purposely."

Coutts eyed him fixedly.

"What d'you intend to do?" he asked.

"Go to Quarry Cove," replied Blake. "I have checked up on times and tides with the Harbour Master here. We know what time Gedge set sail in his boat and when and where it was found drifting. The tide tells us it could only have drifted from a certain spot—

Quarry Cove. I think the crime took place there."

"What crime?" asked Coutts.

"The killing of Harry Stiles, by David Gedge," retorted Blake. "Mrs. Gedge was not surprised with the news people brought to her. She was actually packing a bag to make a getaway. She knew what was going to happen. Both Gedge and Stiles had been making a lot of money lately. It all fits in, Coutts."

"And I think the crime took place in Quarry Cove, close to the shore. There was no dinghy attached to the shrimp. All small boats, except those actually engaged in the coastwise fishing, have been taken farther inland, as a precautionary measure for National Defence. Gedge would no doubt dump the body of Stiles overboard, take the shrimp to this end of Quarry Cove, where it would catch the current, and set it adrift, while he swam ashore. I think we will go to Quarry Cove. For the body of Stiles would probably be caught in the rocks, not being heavy enough to be carried out of the Cove."

Coutts was already grabbing his bowler hat.

"Come on, then," he said. "But one of us ought to have a word with Mrs. Gedge."

"Tinker has that in hand," said Blake quietly.

"You think of everything," growled Coutts, as they left the Harbour Master's office.

Half an hour's arduous walk along the beach brought them to Quarry Cove. It had taken time to discover all details, and evening was setting in. Blake kept a good look out all along the cliffs. It struck him that it would be easy for anyone to drop rocks on their heads from those heights in order to prevent an awkward discovery being made. But there seemed to be no one about.

They separated, roaming about amongst the rocks, which were half covered by the rising tide. It was Coutts who found what they sought.

"Blake!" he cried. "Here!"

Blake joined him. They stood there for a moment gazing down at the still form of a fisherman, floating face downwards in a pool amongst the rocks.

They glanced at one another. Blake nodded assent to the unspoken question. As reverently as possible, they hauled the body out of the pool on to the sands and made a rough-and-ready examination.

"The man who shot him wasn't used to firearms," declared Coutts.

Blake nodded.

"There's no doubt about that," he said. "He fired five times!"

"Four," corrected Coutts. "Look, Blake. He hit him once in the left shoulder, once in the right arm, once in the side, and once in the heart. The one in the heart was the last shot. That makes four."

"But the first shot missed altogether," said Blake. "It chipped the thwart in the boat."

"I forgot that," Coutts admitted. "If we get the man he's maybe carrying a gun with only one cartridge left in it!"

"I think we shall get him," Blake was saying, when suddenly he heard a hail—a voice he knew.

He spun round in time to see Tinker stumbling towards him, and caught him as he reeled and collapsed.

"Steady, old son," he said. "Take it easy, now!"

Gently he lowered Tinker to the sand, and gave him a drink from a flask he took from his hip pocket. "What happened?" he asked.

Tinker recovered quickly, and soon told his experiences.

"They've got a hide-out in the quarry somewhere, guv'nor," he said. "At least, I should think so."

Blake gazed at the mouth of the quarry. He was grim and stern.

"Come on," he said quietly. He led the way up the beach until they were

under the towering cliffs. Then, treading warily, he walked along to where the stream came out of the cove and ran across the sands to the sea.

Cautiously, he entered the quarry itself, then suddenly drew back, one hand outstretched to warn the others. They stood there, craning their necks to see round the jutting cliff.

Two men and a woman walked down a narrow path close to the foot of the cliff. They turned into a cave, the existence of which could not be seen from where the detectives stood.

The moment they were lost to view Blake moved forward again stealthily. Coutts and Tinker followed, careful to make no sound.

So they reached the mouth of the cave. Blake peered round the rock. He saw the two men and the woman. He saw a pile of small oblong boxes lying there, the wood of some of them rotted by the action of salt water.

"Well, Gedge," said one man, "this is where we finish the racket. There's more of this stuff under the water out there, but Scotland Yard is getting too nosy. We'd best pack it up while we're safe. Help me shift this lot to the car, and we'll make a good haul and a get-away."

Blake knew that man. It was Maurice Shenson—the man he had tailed from Hatton Garden.

Coutts heard those words, and it was more than his professional dignity could stand. He brushed past Blake and strode into the cave.

"I don't think you will!" he growled. "I'm a police officer——"

Shenson cursed luridly. He snatched a revolver from his pocket and the bullet plugged Coutts' bowler hat as neatly as if it were done with a skewer.

"My best hat, too!" roared Coutts. He never had known fear in his life and he showed none now. He hurled himself at Shenson, and before the crook

could fire again his hard fist hit him squarely on the jaw. Shenson went down with a thud and lay very still.

Meanwhile the second man—a brawny man in a dark blue jersey—turned and tried to bolt from the cave.

Blake seized him by the shoulder. The man whipped out a clasp knife and struck savagely. Blake side-stepped the blow, and his fist took Gedge under the ear. And when Blake hit he made a good job of it, always. Gedge dropped, dazed and helpless.

Coutts had the bracelets on the pair of them while the woman stood gaping. Things had happened too fast for her to apprehend them properly. The fisherman glared up at Blake. "You've got nothing on me!" he snarled.

"You're wrong," broke in Coutts. "I'm arresting you for the murder of Harry Stiles." And the woman gave a half-muffled scream and dropped in a dead faint.

The case was over. Shenson, aided and abetted by Gedge and Stiles, had been salvaging the cargo of the torpedoed vessel and selling the gold on the market in defiance of all the regulations. Stiles had been greedy and demanded a bigger cut. He never got it. That was all!

THE END.

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